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The Big Key Suicides
JOE RODRIQUEZ
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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH, 1965 Vol. 16, No. 4

NEW JOE RODRIQUEZ NOVELET

THE BIG KEY SUICIDES

by TOM H. MORIARTY

Rookie plainclotheman Rodriquez knew that success and big money could turn a man into a dangerous psychopath. But trapping a killer could make psychology seem text-book remote.

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LEO MARGULIES
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A client with a hired killer's label was hardly Shayne's spot of Bourbon. But the case was most unusual from the start.

Requiem For A Killer

by Brett Halliday

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE COMPLETE NOVELET

THE SHABBY ROOM above the dark Miami back street was silent except for the light breathing of the woman. There was no light in the room, or from the street beyond the window. The window was closed and locked, despite the midsummer night's heat. In the bed, asleep, the woman lay in a pool of sweat in the stifling air. Her face was hidden in darkness. Only the outline of her slim body was faintly visible.

In the distance there was still a continuous hum of traffic on the wider, better-lighted streets of the vacation-land city. But here, in this poor and shabby backwater of the city, few cars passed, and the night was almost silent.

Once, in the distance, a woman screamed under the beating of her man. Another woman laughed somewhere. The cries of children rose from time to time in the stifling air. Erratic footsteps staggered drunkenly down the street below.

The last echo of the drunken footsteps had faded when there was a faint sound beyond the closed window of the room where the woman lay sleeping. The sound seemed to come from above. There

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was a light scraping noise that drew closer to the window. For a long minute there was no other sound. Then came a low, sharp click, and the window opened noiselessly. A man stood inside the room.

He stood for a moment in the shadows, a silent, unmoving figure. A wide-brimmed hat hid his face. His clothes were a pair of ordinary, dark coveralls, and his hands were encased in soft black gloves. On his feet he wore soft leather dancing shoes without heels or hard soles. There were no laces in the shoes. There was no metal or plastic or anything else on his entire body that could have made a sound by striking any hard object.

The man closed the window behind him and crouched low in the shadows of the shabby room. He crouched motionless, patient, obviously making certain that if his entry had disturbed the sleeping woman in any way she would see and hear nothing more.

But the woman only stirred faintly, and moaned in her sleep. At last the man stood up again.

In his right hand he held a small, thin knife with a long blade.

He glided across the room, reached the bed and did not hesitate for a second. The knife raised a fraction of a foot in his hand, and plunged down. The blow was quick, expert, and deadly.

The woman on the bed gasped once, and was dead. Her body twisted in a single convulsion, and lay still. Her head had moved, and what light there was from the window fell across her dead face.

She was not really a woman, she was no more than a girl. Her pretty face, framed in thick, dark hair, looked, even in death, like the face of an innocent child. The killer stood there for some seconds looking down at her, his shoulders slightly stooped.

Then he shrugged, and reached down to feel the wrist of his victim. He let the lifeless arm drop, turned, and walked silently back across the dark and dingy room to the window. He opened the window. Just beyond the sill a long rope dangled down from the roof. The man climbed out, closed the window behind him, and swiftly hauled himself up the rope hand over hand.

On the roof of the dilapidated building, he brought up the rope, removed the large hook to which it had been attached, and wound it into tight loops. He placed the coiled rope and the hooks into a small black suitcase. Then he removed his coveralls, dancing shoes, gloves, and hat, and placed them on top of the rope. The last thing that went into the suitcase was the long, thin knife.

From the suitcase the man took a pair of ordinary street shoes. He put on the shoes, closed the suitcase, studied the entire roof care-

fully, and then turned and vanished over the adjoining roofs into the night.

In the shabby room below the woman lay on her bed, blood slowly mixing with the sweat of the sheets.

Her death had taken no more than five minutes.

II

MIKE SHAYNE arrived quite late at his office that morning. As the big redhead strode in the door, Lucy Hamilton stared at him with a look of anxiety in her eyes. Shayne was half way across the outer office before the significance of that look dawned on him. He stopped, whirled.

The man standing behind the door was small and swarthy, with slightly pinched features and close-cropped black hair. He was well-dressed in a conservative dark suit, and except for his quick, cold eyes, he was a man who would have remained inconspicuous in a crowd. An ordinary man.

But this man was far from ordinary.

"What do you want, Bix?" Shayne said.

"I need help," the man said. "I got a job for you."

Only the smallest of bulges showed the pistol in Bix's right hand jacket pocket. The small man's hand rested just inside the pocket. The pocket, Shayne knew

—everyone knew—was specially made of leather inside to carry the pistol. Hidden somewhere in the small man's neat clothes there would be a second pistol. Everyone knew that, too.

George Bix was a professional killer.

"You want to hire me?" Shayne said.

"Yeh. Legit, on the up-and-up. You want to talk?"

Shayne nodded. "All right." He turned to lead the way into his private office.

"The girl," George Bix said, "she comes too."

Shayne motioned to Lucy. His brown-eyed secretary followed him into the private office. George Bix closed the door behind him, and motioned Shayne and Lucy to seats. Then he sat down where he could see both door and windows. His hand remained in his pocket.

"I ain't hot, Shayne," Bix said evenly, "but guys got a way of reaching for the phone and hollering copper when they see me."

It was not the telephone the detective had considered reaching for, but his gun. He had not considered it very seriously. George Bix was quick, alert, and deadly. The small killer had survived a long time in a hard world.

"You said you wanted help," Shayne said.

"I met a girl," Bix said. "A week ago. She's dead."

"Bad luck," Shayne said.

"I met her, Shayne, I liked her. A week later she's dead."

"You're all broken up," Shayne said.

"So you don't like me," Bix said evenly. "Okay, I don't blame you. But you're gonna find out who did it, see? Maybe it was just some joker was jealous. Maybe it was me they wanted and someone loused up. Or maybe it's a frame, Shayne. But I want him caught."

"A frame?"

"Look, Shayne, when George Bix meets a girl and a week later she's dead, the cops are gonna get one idea. They ain't gonna look no farther than George Bix."

"You've got a point," Shayne admitted.

"Besides, I liked her. I mean, we had plans, Mary and me," Bix said.

"After a week?"

"For me a week's a long time, Shayne," Bix said. "What about it? I got money, you're a detective."

"Not for your dirty work," Shayne said.

"If it was my dirty work, I'd handle it," Bix said. "But it ain't like that. I can't go asking the cops questions, because it *could* be a frame. I got to lay low. If it ain't a frame, I'm asking you to find the killer legit. Ain't I got a right to that? I want to do it right, see. You want to make me handle it myself?"

Shayne looked at Lucy Hamilton. His brown-eyed secretary was nodding to him.

"He's right, Michael," Lucy said. "I don't care who he is, if he's innocent he has a right to be helped."

"If he's innocent," Shayne said. "If you did it, Bix, I'll find out."

"I know you will," Bix said.

"Okay, what can you tell me?"

"I was out of town a couple of days," Bix said. "I got back and went around to her place. There was no answer. I figured she was out, so I hung around out of sight. She never showed up. I went home. This morning I found the story in the morning paper. Page twenty-nine."

Shayne opened the morning paper Lucy Hamilton always had waiting on his desk. The story was brief. The body of a woman had been found in a cheap rooming house. She had been stabbed. A

religious medal found in her purse had the name Mary Grimaldi, and the legend St. Bridget's Convent, 1949. She had been dead two days when found by the landlady.

"You can prove you were out of town?" Shayne asked.

Bix nodded. "If I have to, Shayne. I got witnesses."

"The kind of witnesses you customarily use?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're in trouble," Shayne said.

"That's what I need you for," Bix said.

"To prove you didn't do it?" Shayne said. "You could buy proof of that the way you always have done, Bix."

"Yeh," Bix said, "only this time I want the guy who did do it. Like I said, Shayne, I liked Mary. I liked her a lot."

The small killer stood up. He tossed a bundle of money onto Shayne's desk.

"I'm hiring you, right? That means you don't talk about me to the cops. I'll keep in touch."

The killer went out the door. Mike Shayne looked at his telephone. He began to tug on his left earlobe.

"George Bix and a girl from some convent," he said to Lucy. "It sounds phony as all hell, angel."

"It happens, Michael," Lucy said. " think he really loved her."

"After a week?"

"Perhaps he's scared, Michael."

"Maybe, angel," Shayne said.

He did not think George Bix was scared. Bix did not scare that easily. But something peculiar must be happening to make George Bix come to him. Either a frame, and a very good one, or a plain, ordinary murder of a girl by someone George Bix would have no way of knowing any more than an ordinary man whose girl had been killed.

Mike Shayne had to know more about Mary Grimaldi.

III

CHIEF WILL GENTRY raised a thick eyebrow and glowered at Mike Shayne as he leaned across his office desk.

"A two-bit killing, routine," he said. "We get ten a day, and someone hired you to investigate? Who, Mike?"

"You know I can't tell you that," Shayne said.

"Mary Grimaldi is just one cut above a Jane Doe," Gentry said. "Who hired you is important."

"Let's just say someone who thought a lot of her," Shayne said.

Gentry snorted. "From the look of her I'd say there were probably a hell of a lot of men like that."

"And you think it was that kind of killing? Love, jealousy?"

"Maybe," Gentry said.

"What about a gang murder?" Shayne said.

Gentry almost jumped from his seat. The gruff Chief of Police swore softly, and narrowed his eyes.

"All right, Mike, you know something. Now . . ." Gentry began.

"Then it could have been?" Shayne interrupted.

Gentry shrugged, nodded. "An expert job. The girl had only lived in the place a week. The room is on the second floor. There was no fire escape, and we figure that the door and window were locked. The killer came two storys down from the roof on a rope, opened the window from the outside, killed her without a sound. It's a pretty deserted area, though. He could have made noise and no one would have heard."

"But you think he knew his job?" Shayne said.

"Hanley thinks so, he's on the case," Gentry said. "But I'm not so sure. In that dump she could have screamed and no one would have paid any attention. And, Mike, today just about anyone who can read can be an expert. Even the comics can tell a man how to be a killer."

"But no one heard anything?"

"No one admits hearing anything," Gentry corrected. "Six other roomers and the landlady all swear they heard nothing. It took the landlady two days to get worried enough to find the body. That's the kind of place it is."

"Can I see the body and the effects?"

"Hanley will take you," Gentry said. "And, Mike, when you find something we should have, tell us, okay? I'll trust your judgment."

"Thanks, Will," Shayne said.

Shayne's eyes were grim when he left Gentry's office. The girl had lived in the death room a week—just about as long as she had known Bix, if he wasn't lieing. It had a strange smell to it. She could have been hiding from someone, who found her and killed her. Or it could be a frame-up all the way, her entire connection with Bix a planned deal.

If it were a frame-up, Shayne owed Bix silence about the killer's connection to the girl. If it was a simple murder by someone unconnected to Bix, then the mention of George Bix's name would only cloud the issue. Both Bix and Gentry thought it could have been a gang kill, but neither was sure, and Shayne had to know more about Mary Grimaldi's life before he was ready to name George Bix to Gentry.

Lieutenant Oscar Hanley was a tall, taciturn man. Shayne had worked with Hanley before, and now the tall man led the way to the morgue without a word. They looked at Mary Grimaldi. The girl was beautiful even in death. Not a day over twenty, and the stab wound was like a grotesque flaw in her smooth white body.

Shayne felt almost angry. A beautiful young girl no more than twenty—and George Bix's girl friend. A crime that happened every day. A young girl from a convent dazzled by the power of a killer's money, perhaps excited by his cold eyes and arrogance.

Excited and dazzled, and now she was dead. How did it happen? How did such a girl meet the George Bixes? Or was it all a plant, the girl a tool in a frame-up?

"What do you have to go on, Hanley?" Shayne said.

"Not much," Hanley said.

The Lieutenant led Shayne back to his office. From his desk drawer he took the pitifully few items that had belonged to Mary Grimaldi. A thin wallet with three dollars and a single picture of herself standing beside a young, smiling priest. The religious medal with her name, Mary Grimaldi, and the legend: *St. Bridget's Convent, 1949*. A pale lipstick, a cheap comb, some orange sticks, and a crumpled sheet of notepaper with the beginnings of a letter: *Dear Father Paul, Please tell me what I must do? I am afraid, I . . .*

Shayne held the piece of paper. "Any ideas about Father Paul?"

"You know how many St. Bridgets there are in this country?" Hanley said.

"No one has come forward to identify her?"

"We don't even know her name

was really Grimaldi," Hanley said. "She was registered with the landlady as Schultz, Mary Schultz. Tomorrow the papers run both names and a picture. She had to know someone."

"Yeh," Shayne said, "she had to know someone."

The girl had lived in the death room only a week or so, and under a phony name. Or was the Grimaldi name a phony? For a girl from a convent, Mary Grimaldi had been acting very strangely. And just what had she been afraid of?

"Not even a boy friend yet?" Shayne said.

"Her landlady says there was a big guy hanging around three or four days ago, but he never came really close to the house. So she didn't get a good look. The Grimaldi girl never had a visitor."

"Anything else?"

Hanley nodded. "One thing you

don't see with her other stuff. She had half a grand in one big roll."

"She had five hundred dollars?"

"Yeh, all wrapped up. Hadn't touched it from the look of it."

"Can I have a look at her room?"

"If Gentry says so," Hanley said.

As Shayne left Headquarters to go to his car he reasoned that Mary Grimaldi and Bix must have met at Bix's apartment. So far the police had not connected Bix and the girl. But Bix had not mentioned $500. Perhaps he hadn't known about it. It could have something to do with a frame—the girl paid for something. One thing was certain, no matter what the landlady said, Mary Grimaldi had had at least one visitor.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE closed the door behind him. The landlady padded away down the corridor. The room was dingy and shabby even in the sunlight. There was still a stain of blood on the mattress.

The room was also bare and empty. There was nowhere to hide even a match. There was no rug on the floor, the closets were empty, and the bureau drawers dusty and bare.

Mary Grimaldi, if that were her name, had lived in the room a week or more without even disturbing the dust. The only proof that she had ever occupied the room was the stain of her blood on the mattress.

Shayne turned toward the door to leave. He froze motionless. Someone was out in the hall.

Shayne glided behind the door. Whoever was in the hall was walking softly. The footsteps came closer to the door of the death room. There was a silence, and then the door to the room opened abruptly and a man stood inside.

He was a short, scrawny man, hardly more than a boy. For an instant he seemed to hesitate. He looked around the room with surprised, puzzled eyes. He seemed confused, and in his confusion he had not seen Mike Shayne standing behind the door.

The detective stepped out and closed the door. "You're surprised," Shayne said, "why?"

The intruder whirled. His scrawny face was dark and intense. He wore a cheap pair of slacks and a sport shirt.

"You . . . you . . . are police?" the boy said.

"Detective," Shayne said. "You thought she lived here? You expected to find furniture, clothes, things that belonged to her?"

The boy was frightened. "I just want . . . something, you know? I mean, she's dead, I want to have something to . . . remember."

"She was your girl friend?" Shayne said.

The boy shook his head. "No,

she didn't care. I loved her, but she didn't care."

Shayne watched the boy. His accent was Spanish, probably Puerto Rican or Cuban. His hands were bruised and dirty.

"Who are you?" Shayne said.

"Madero, Francisco Madero," the boy said. "They call me Pancho."

"How old are you, Pancho?"

"Nineteen, I think. We come from Cuba, I'm not sure."

Shayne nodded. "How did you know Miss Grimaldi? If that was her real name."

"Sure, Mary Grimaldi. We work same place," Madero said.

"Work?"

"Yeh, she waitress, me I'm busboy."

"Where?"

"*The Red Pelican,* you know?"

Shayne knew *The Red Pelican.* It was a restaurant and supper club owned by Roger Mortimer. Only it was much more than a simple restaurant and club. Mortimer was a gambler, a big-time operator, and Ray Incavo's major competition for the illegal gambling trade. Behind the elegant exterior of *The Red Pelican* there was an even more elegant back room where the roulette wheels went all night.

"Mary Grimaldi was a waitress there?" Shayne said.

"Yes."

"And you're a busboy, and she wouldn't give you a tumble?"

The boy was angry. "Always she dress up, go out with rich men. I love her, but she laugh at me. Now she's dead. I just come, take something to keep, you know?"

"You thought she lived here?" Shayne said.

The boy shrugged. "I don' know where she live. She no tell me. Once I follow, but she catch me, and get real mad. She don't come to work for maybe a week. Then I see the paper. It give this address. I come to take something to keep."

"You don't know where she really lived?"

"No."

"But she went out a lot with rich men? Was one of them a small man, dark." Mike Shayne described George Bix to Madero.

"I don't see him. No, not him. Big feller, very rich, I see him many times."

A big man. Shayne remembered that the landlady had said a big man had been hanging around this house. Maybe Bix was right. Mary Grimaldi had had another lover who found where she had been living after meeting Bix, and had killed her.

On the other hand, the boy, Pancho Madero, could know more about the death room than he pretended to. Madero was in love with the dead woman, and she had spurned him.

"Okay, Madero, you better tell your story to the police," Shayne

said. "I mean right now. You go down to headquarters and ask for Lieutenant Hanley. If you don't go now, you could be in big trouble, you understand?"

"Police? You not police?"

"Private detective, but I work close with the police. You do as I say."

The boy nodded. Madero look at the stain of blood on the mattress. For a second Shayne thought the boy was about to cry. But Madero only rubbed his eyes and turned away, his narrow shoulders jerking.

After Madero had gone, Shayne lighted a cigarette. His grey eyes were cold and narrow. Roger Mortimer was a dangerous man. The gambler was also a big man, Shayne remembered, and Mortimer could very easily have a reason for wanting to frame George Bix. Mary Grimaldi had worked for Mortimer.

Shayne crushed out his cigarette in the only ashtray in the room. A film of dust lay on the ashtray. Mary Grimaldi had died here, but she had not lived here.

Shayne was already thinking of what he would ask Roger Mortimer as he strode out of the room and down the stairs toward his car parked out front in the Miami sun.

V

The Red Pelican was a large, two-story building in a gaudy section of Miami Beach. Ray Incavo's biggest place was only a block away, and in between there were many Clubs, bars, restaurants, and other, smaller, gambling places, all

well hidden behind legitimate fronts.

The drive across the Causeway had been pleasant, and Shayne parked his car a block from *The Red Pelican*. He ambled into the bar, all but deserted in the early afternoon hour, and headed past the bar toward the back door to the gambling rooms. He had reached the door when a large, muscular man blocked his way.

"Off limits, peeper."

Shayne stared coldly at the big man. Jake Mann, Roger Mortimer's number one boy. Mann had muscles and the extra edge the pistol bulging under his coat gave him. Shayne did not like the big bodyguard.

"I want to see Mortimer," Shayne said. "How do you want it, the easy way or the hard way?"

Mann grinned. "It's been a dull week, peeper, I need the exercise."

"I figure you get plenty of exercise going over roofs and through windows, Mann," Shayne said.

Mann stopped grinning. "Meaning what?"

"I hear you've been losing waitresses," Shayne said.

The big bodyguard turned red. "Why you . . ."

Behind Jake Mann the door opened. He had taken a step toward Shayne, his fists clenched. Shayne lowered his left shoulder, tensed. Before Mann could take a second step, Roger Mortimer stepped out of the open door behind him.

"All right, Jake," Mortimer said.

"He saved your life, Jake," Shayne said with a grin.

"You want to see me, Shayne?" Mortimer said.

"I do."

"Come on then," Mortimer said.

The gambler led Shayne through the door into the gambling rooms which were empty at this hour. Jake Mann followed Shayne across the deserted rooms into Roger Mortimer's private office. The gambler sat down behind his desk and lighted a large, expensive cigar. He did not offer Shayne one.

Mortimer waved Shayne to a chair. The gambler, too, was a big man as Shayne had remembered, but not as big as Jake Mann who stood, now, beside Mortimer's desk.

"All right, Shayne," Mortimer said, "what's this about a waitress?"

"Mary Grimaldi," Shayne said.

"Never heard of her," Mortimer said.

"Jake seemed to have," Shayne said.

Mortimer looked up at his bodyguard. "You know her, Jake?"

"Yeh, boss," Mann said. "A little broad, dark-haired. She's been working here about two months. About a week ago she didn't show for work. That Halstead guy was asking, remember?"

Mortimer seemed to be think-

ing. Then the gambler nodded as if he had just placed the girl.

"I sort of remember, never noticed her much," Mortimer said slowly. "I don't pay much attention to the waitresses, Shayne. Jake says she was only here a couple of months. Why do you want to know about her?"

"Who's Halstead?" Shayne said, ignoring the gambler's question for the moment.

"A customer," Mortimer said. "He's rich. He likes to lose money and pinch the girls."

"You know where I can find him?" Shayne said.

"He's in the book, Thayer Halstead,' 'Mortimer said. "Now what about this Grimaldi kid?"

"You read the papers," Shayne said.

"Only the comics," Mortimer said. "She was in the papers?"

"Dead," Shayne said. "Murdered."

"And you figure on pinning it on me?"

Jake Mann clenched his ham-like fists again. "Listen, peeper, I don't have to . . ."

"Shut up, Jake," Mortimer snapped. "When, Shayne? When did she get it?"

"About one A.M. three days ago," Shayne said.

Mortimer nodded. "Three days ago, about one A.M. Jake, where were we?"

"In Port Sun Beach," Mann said.

"What were we doing?"

"Playin' poker with six guys," Mann said promptly.

"Yeh," Shayne said, "six good friends and honest citizens?"

"No, Shayne," Mortimer said. "I went up there to buy a restaurant. The six guys are all legit businessmen. One was even the Mayor's brother-in-law."

"Another was a cop, a Captain," Jake Mann said.

Mortimer stood up. "So if there's nothing else on your mind, I've got business. Okay?"

"Lucky you picked that day to leave town," Shayne said, "and both of you, too. What time did you leave Miami?"

"About six o'clock, I think," Mortimer said. "Now I figure you're leaving, right?"

"After I get Mary Grimaldi's home address, and where she worked before here," Shayne said.

"See my headwaiter, he handles the hiring, Shayne," Mortimer said.

"Thanks," Shayne said, standing up, "and you better get ready to run that record for the cops, they'll be around."

"Anytime," the big gambler said.

Shayne left Mortimer and his big bodyguard chuckling together in Mortimer's office. The headwaiter took only a few minutes to check his records. He had Mary Grimaldi's address, and the last place she had worked before *The Red Pelican.*

The address was in Miami

Beach, not far from *The Red Pelican*. The place she had worked was some restaurant in Miami. Shayne decided to visit the girl's apartment first. By now the busboy would have told Hanley his story. If George Bix was being framed, there was no lead so far, and Shayne wanted to stay one step ahead of the police.

VI

MARY GRIMALDI'S apartment was in a quiet building away from the gaudy bustle of Miami Beach. The superintendent told Shayne that neither Miss Grimaldi nor her roommate were at home. The super had not seen Miss Grimaldi for some time, maybe a week or more.

"She come here about six months ago," the super said, "a nice kid, you know? The roommate come later, Sheila Lenihan. She answered the ad, I guess."

"Ad?"

"Yeh, the Grimaldi kid couldn't swing the rent alone, so she run an ad."

"The Lenihan girl isn't home?"

"Left kind of fast about three hours ago. I guess she was late for work."

"Do you know where she works?" Shayne asked.

"Some office, I ain't sure where."

"All right," Shayne said. "I better have a look at her place."

"You're a cop, ain't you?" the super said.

"Yeh," Shayne said.

"I figured. She's in some kind of trouble?"

The superintendent took Shayne up and let him into the apartment with a pass key. After the super had gone, Shayne looked around the small apartment. It was cheaply but tastefully furnished. There were two rooms. In the bedroom Shayne noted the crucifix over the left bed and the neat clothes in the lefthand closet that had been Mary Grimaldi's.

The clothes were both neat and clean. For the most part they were simple clothes, even demure, but there were four expensive evening

gowns that seemed almost out of place. The busboy had said that Mary Grimaldi often went out to expensive places. Shayne found nothing else in the bedroom or living room until he looked in the top drawer of the single bureau.

There he found a pile of empty envelopes and an address book. The envelopes were all addressed to St. Bridget's Convent, Jacksonville, Florida. They were all postmarked Miami Beach. There was no return address, but many of the envelopes were from Clubs, restaurants, and hotels—including some from *The Red Pelican.* The envelopes seemed to cover a period of more than ten years.

The address book had few entries. There was one for St. Bridget's, with a Jacksonville exchange. There were a few other Jacksonville numbers, and one for Thayer Halstead in Miami. There was no mention of George Bix anywhere. There was not even a name that sounded as if it could have been an alias for Bix, or any other Miami number.

Shayne studied the address book. It was the second time within the hour that he had come across the name of Thayer Halstead. The address in Mary Grimaldi's book was in a plush area of Miami Beach. Shayne decided it was time to talk to Halstead. He could come back to see Sheila Lenihan later.

In his car he drove through the sunny streets of Miami Beach until he reached the secluded, tree-lined streets where Thayer Halstead lived. He sat in his car and looked at the imitation Tudor mansion behind its trees and hedges, surrounded by a vast lawn that was immaculate. The Halstead house was a long way from a shabby room in Miami where Mary Grimaldi had died.

Shayne left his car and walked up the broad drive to the front door of Thayer Halstead's house. A white-coated oriental answered, and ushered Shayne into a living room not much smaller than the lobby of the Fontainebleu. Sunlight flooded the room through the high windows. A noise made Shayne turn. A very beautiful blonde stood in the room.

"The famous Michael Shayne," the blonde said, "what has Thayer done this time?"

The beautiful woman walked toward Shayne. He realized at once that she was more than a little drunk. She smiled and walked straight past Shayne to a large home-bar.

"I'm Mrs. Thayer Halstead," the blonde said, "a fine, upstanding name. You may call me Jennifer. Drink?"

"Early for me," Shayne said.

"Early for anyone," a man's voice said.

Shayne looked toward the man who had just entered the sunny room. He was tall and big, a handsome man only faintly grey at the

temples. He wore impeccable clothes, a rich silk ascot at his throat beneath the open silk shirt.

"Not for me," the blonde said. "I drink, Mr. Shayne, with all that I have. Odd isn't it? And darling, I think Mr. Shayne wants to talk about that Grimaldi girl."

Shayne raised a ragged red eyebrow toward the woman.

"We read it in the paper," Jennifer Halstead said, "but poor, dear Thayer did not want to be involved. I assume he is now involved."

"Up to his ascot," Shayne said drily.

Thayer Halstead reddened, and stepped menacingly toward Shayne. The detective grinned. Thayer Halstead did not look to be in especially good condition. The wealthy man stopped.

"Now you listen to me, Shayne, I . . ."

"The police will be here soon," Shayne said, "I can wait if you want, but I thought maybe you'd talk to me, it might help later."

"Talk to the man, dear. After all, your little affairs are no secret," Mrs. Halstead said.

"Shut up, Jennifer," Halstead snapped.

Shayne was watching the woman. Her tone was light, bantering, and she smiled as she sipped her straight whisky in the sunlight. But there was something about her eyes that made Shayne feel sure that she was not in the least amused. Her eyes were cold and hard as she looked at her handsome husband.

Shayne did not think Jennifer Halstead was quite as indifferent as she pretended.

"But, darling, everyone knows we have an adult understanding."

"I said shut up," Halstead snapped.

"It's the money," the woman said, "I can't let go of it."

The handsome playboy ignored his wife this time. He began to pace the enormous living room.

"Look, Shayne, I met the girl at the *Pelican,*" Thayer Halstead said. "I liked her. I took her out a few times, bought her some clothes because she wanted to go to the big Clubs and gambling places. That was all. I liked her, dated her. It ended there."

"When did you see her last?"

"Over a week ago," Halstead said. "I looked for her at the *Red Pelican,* but she seemed to have vanished."

"Poor, Thayer, he was so angry," Jennifer Halstead said. "He put in a lot of time and money, bought her those expensive dresses, and he never got what he wanted. Did you darling?"

The red-faced playboy almost snarled at his wife.

"You'd like to think that, wouldn't you. As a matter of fact, I liked Mary a lot, damn you."

"Were you having an affair?" Shayne asked.

"That's none of your damned business," Halstead snarled.

"It might be," Shayne said bluntly, "if you were jealous, went looking for her, found her, and killed her."

"I looked, damn you, but I couldn't find her! She just vanished. Besides, she didn't have any other men."

"You're sure? What about George Bix?" Shayne said.

"Bix? I never heard of anyone named Bix!"

"Small man, dark-haired, very quick movements, on the silent side," Shayne said.

Halstead shook his handsome head. "I never saw her with anyone like that. Now if you asked about Roger Mortimer, I might wonder."

"Mortimer?" Shayne said quickly.

Halstead nodded. "I never saw them outside the *Pelican,* but she was always talking to him. In fact, she talked to a lot of the Club and restaurant owners. Hotel managers, too. But I saw her with Mortimer at his Club many times."

Shayne tugged on his left earlobe slowly. Roger Mortimer had pretended that he could not even remember Mary Grimaldi. Now Halstead claimed that they talked together often.

"You can prove where you were three days ago at one A.M.?"

"I was here in bed."

"You have proof?"

Jennifer Halstead smiled. "Roger sleeps alone in his own room. It's an awfully big house. I imagine almost anyone could sneak in and out unnoticed."

"Well, I didn't! I couldn't even find the little tramp!"

Shayne watched Halstead. The playboy sounded very much like a man who had been more than annoyed by the girl, and had wanted to find her very much. Jennifer Halstead was smiling again.

"By *tramp,* Thayer means the opposite. I strongly suspect poor Thayer was rebuffed all along," Jennifer Halstead said, and the woman looked thoughtful. "As a matter of fact, Mary Grimaldi was a strange girl—not at all like Thayer's usual conquests. I really don't think she was at all his type, or that he was her type."

"What do you mean, strange?" Shayne said.

"Well, I don't think the girl cared a damn about Thayer, or about night clubs, or dresses. I think she had some special reason for going out with dear Thayer. She was using the poor man for something."

"That's damned ridiculous!" Thayer Halstead insisted. "You're just jealous as usual, you lush!'

"Poor, Thayer, he simply can't believe I don't care about his little romances," Jennifer Halstead said.

"Don't you?" Shayne said.

The woman looked at him. Her lips smiled but her eyes did not.

"No," she said.

"I suppose you have an alibi for three days ago at one A.M.?"

She smiled. "No more than Thayer. I sleep alone also. I could have gotten in and out quite easily."

Thayer Halstead swore aloud. "Damn it, Shayne, if you don't like Mortimer as a suspect, try Angelo Serra. He owns a restaurant, a hash house really, over in Miami. He was always hanging around her. The old fool is old enough to be her father!"

"What restaurant?"

"It's called *Angelo's*. She worked there before the *Red Pelican!*"

It was the same restaurant Shayne had gotten from Roger Mortimer's headwaiter. It looked like the next stop. The police must be hot on his trail by now, and so far he had found not even a hint of a frame-up or even a connection to George Bix.

If it were a frame, someone was being very cagy about it. On the other hand, Miami seemed full of men, or women, who could have been very jealous of Mary Grimaldi.

"All right," Shayne said. "I suggest you two stay put for a while."

"We have nowhere to go, Mr. Shayne," Jennifer Halstead said.

Thayer Halstead said nothing. The big playboy was pouring himself a drink as Shayne left. Outside in his car, Shayne thought

again about Mary Grimaldi and her men. There was one very peculiar fact—every one of the men appeared to think it was someone else Mary loved, not them. No one seemed to know about George Bix.

Shayne drove through the streets of Miami Beach and back onto the Causeway toward Miami.

Mary Grimaldi had obviously been hiding from someone or something. She met Bix, and vanished from all the others. Why? And who? Which one of them was lieing about Bix, and about himself? One of them must have found her. Perhaps Angelo Serra.

VII

ANGELO SERRA said, "Mary's dead? Dead!"

Serra was a small, thickset man of at least fifty. He stood behind the counter of his cheap restaurant, a look of disbelief on his swarthy face. In late afternoon the place was empty, the two waitresses idling in the rear. Serra seemed close to tears.

"No," Serra said, "I don't believe you!"

"It was in the papers this morning," Shayne said.

The grey-haired man blinked. "The papers? I don't read. I ain't got . . ." the restaurant owner stopped, his eyes narrowing. "In the papers? Why?"

"She was murdered," Shayne said.

"Murdered? Who . . ." The restaurant owner stared at Shayne, brushed his thick hand across his eyes. "That Halstead! I'll kill him!"

"What makes you think it was Halstead?"

"A bum! A rich bum! He bought her, I know!"

"What about Mortimer?"

"Sure, him too, the crook! That busboy! All of them! I want to marry her, give her good home, but all the time she go with those bums!"

"Maybe you better start at the beginning," Shayne said. "How did she come here?"

The thickset man walked out from behind his counter and sat down at a table. Shayne sat facing him. The restaurant owner brushed his eyes again with his thick hand.

"She come for a job," Serra said. "I like her. She work here maybe four months. I fall for her, you see? She don't want me, I ain't good enough. All the time she wants to go to Miami Beach, those Clubs and hotels. Any guy takes her out has to take her over to the Beach.

"Then she quits. I find out she got a job by the *Red Pelican.* I know that joint, real bad, a gambling place. I try to tell her, but she gets mad. She says she got her reasons. Then that Halstead comes along. He buys her clothes, takes her out all the time. Always she's hanging around the Mortimer louse, and his big killer, Mann.

"That busboy, he ain't so bad, a good kid at least. Only she don't give him a break. All the time she goes to these lousy clubs, bars, hotels."

"You saw a lot of what she did," Shayne said.

Angelo Serra shrugged. "I fol-

low her, all over. Okay, I'm an old fool, but I want to marry her, so I follow her."

"How far did you follow her?" Shayne said softly.

"How far I don't know . . ."

"Maybe you followed her to that furnished room. Maybe you saw her with Bix and he was one too many."

"Room? Bix? What do I know about that? I follow her, then she disappear, maybe a week ago, maybe more. Who is Bix?"

"George Bix, a small man, dark, cold eyes," and Shayne again described Bix in detail.

"I never see one like that," Serra said.

Shayne tugged slowly on his earlobe. Again no one seemed to have seen, or known about, George Bix. Unless Serra was lieing. The man admitted following Mary Grimaldi. He could easily have found her hiding place, seen her with Bix, and killed her. But Shayne was suddenly aware of something else about Mary Grimaldi.

It had been in front of his eyes all along, but he had not seen it—Mary Grimaldi was looking for something or someone. She was looking in the bars, clubs, hotels, and restaurants of Miami Beach. Shayne remembered all the empty envelopes from Miami Beach, many from hotels, clubs, and restaurants! What had she been looking for? The answer, if there was going to be one, would probably come from St. Bridget's Convent.

Shayne stood up. He wanted to talk with Sheila Lenihan, the dead girl's roommate. Then he would pay a visit to St. Bridget's convent. He looked down at Angelo Serra.

"Maybe you're telling the truth, Serra, and maybe not. You better be ready for the police. They'll be in."

A voice spoke behind Shayne. "They are already in."

Shayne turned to see Lieutenant Hanley and two other of Gentry's men. They were standing behind him. Hanley did not look pleased.

"You could have waited for us, Shayne," Hanley said.

"I sent the busboy," Shayne said.

"To give yourself a few hours start," Hanley said. "We've been trailing you around. Gentry doesn't like to have his suspects all warned before we get there."

"I'll make a report," Shayne said drily. "Since you're here, we can call on Sheila Lenihan together. She was the Grimaldi girl's roommate."

"Save yourself some trouble, Mike," Hanley said. "She came in by herself this morning. If you'd checked in you'd have known that."

"She saw the story in the paper?"

"Yeh," Hanley said.

"Let's go then, I want to talk to her," Shayne said.

"She doesn't know much. Just that the Grimaldi kid was scared, but we knew that from that letter. The girl did locate the Convent for us. There's a Father Paul on his way from Jacksonville."

"I still want to talk to her," Shayne said.

The big detective strode toward the door. Behind him Lieutenant Hanley ordered his men to bring Angelo Serra along. Then they all followed Shayne out of the small restaurant.

VIII

NIGHT HAD SETTLED over Miami before the police had finished questioning all the suspects and sent them home. Roger Mortimer had been the last to leave, a point his lawyer had protested as police harrassment of his innocent client.

"My client wasn't even in town!" the lawyer had stormed.

"Get out of here with your damned client," Hanley had said.

Hanley and Shayne were alone now with the dead girl's roommate, Sheila Lenihan, in the Lieutenant's office. They were waiting for Father Paul from St. Bridget's Convent. The priest was due any minute, and Shayne tugged hard on his earlobe as he went over the Lenihan girl's story.

"You're sure nothing special happened the day she vanished?"

"No, Mr. Shayne, she just sat there sort of scared, and then she took her purse and walked out and never came back. She wrote a letter to Father Paul, but she did that two or three times every week."

The Lenihan girl was a tall, attractive brunette of about twenty-five. She worked in the office of the Acme Real Estate Company. She had answered the ad for a roommate, and had lived with Mary Grimaldi for nearly six months.

"Nothing but her purse?"

"That was all."

"None of her men came looking for her that day?"

"No. Mr. Mortimer called her the day before, but she was late for work, and I think he just called to see if she was going to work."

"Did she go?" Hanley said.

"Yes."

"Was Mortimer one of her boyfriends?"

Shayne was beginning to think grimly about Roger Mortimer. The gambler still claimed he had not even remembered Mary Grimaldi, but now it appeared he had called her only the day before she disappeared.

"No, I don't think so."

"Had he called her many times?" Hanley said.

Sheila Lenihan shook her head. "I don't think he had ever called before. When I first moved in, while she was working for Angelo, she had a lot of different dates. But lately the only ones who called

were Mr. Halstead, Angelo, and that Pancho."

"Did you ever see her with anyone else? Did she ever mention anyone else, someone she may have just met?" Shayne asked.

"No, no one."

Hanley said, "Was she in love with Halstead? Any plans?"

"I don't think she really even liked him," Sheila Lenihan said.

"Did any of the men, or anyone, come looking for her after she vanished?" Hanley asked.

"All of them," Shiela Lenihan said simply.

"Mortimer, too?"

"No, not Mr. Mortimer. He never even called again."

Shayne was about to ask what Mary Grimaldi had been looking for, when the door opened and a policeman brought in a young, good-looking priest. The priest introduced himself as Father Paul, from St. Bridget's Convent, Jacksonville. He sadly identified the few belongings of Mary Grimaldi.

"She was a good girl, a fine girl, we had great hopes for Mary," Father Paul said as he sat down in the dim silence of Hanley's office.

"What was she looking for, Father?" Shayne asked.

"We weren't sure, exactly," Father Paul said. "Mary was an orphan. We have a school at the Convent. She was brought to the school fifteen years ago as a child of four. The man who brought her said her name was Grimaldi. He left her and never came back."

"Who was he?" Shayne asked.

"We never knew. I wasn't at the convent then. No one remembers him. The records show that he gave his name as Grimaldi, too, but the relationship wasn't stated. Four times a year since then a letter came with money. Just money, nothing else. It was always cash, usually very large bills."

Shayne began to pace the office. "Old bills or new bills?"

"Old bills, Mr. Shayne. We wondered about that, too. When we see large bills they are usually new, straight from the bank."

Shayne nodded. "And Mary was looking for the man who brought her to the convent?"

"Yes," Father Paul said. "Those envelopes you found were the ones with the money. We kept them for her. She was convinced that whoever was sending the money must work, or live, in a small area of Miami Beach. The postmarks, and the hotel, club, and restaurants letterheads on the envelopes made her think that he must go to many places, move around, like a gambler."

"Mortimer?" Hanley said.

"Maybe," Shayne said.

"I tried to dissuade her, but she was determined," Father Paul said. "She came up here and took a job, and then she asked about anyone named Grimaldi everywhere she could. She took the job at *The*

Red Pelican. She wrote to me regularly, but she had found out nothing. Then about a week ago, I got this letter.

Father Paul laid a letter on the desk in front of Hanley. The Lieutenant read it, and handed it up to Shayne. It was short, and simple.

Dear Father Paul,
I am in terrible trouble. I can't tell you about it, I can't tell anyone I don't know what to do. He has given me money, but I know he does not trust me. I am afraid to tell, and afraid not to tell. I don't know why I am even writing this. Perhaps to ask you to pray for me. Perhaps I should tell you, but I am so afraid, I have to think. Pray for me, please.

Mary.

Shayne read it over a second time. Then he returned it to Hanley. He began to pace again. His grey eyes were like slits of steel.

"Do you think she found the man?" Hanley said.

"Possibly," Shayne said, "but I don't think so. She would probably have mentioned that to the Father. Remember that five hundred she had, Hanley?"

Sheila Lenihan looked up. "Five hundred, Mr. Shayne? Why, Mary never had money like that! Even hatcheck girls don't make that kind of money."

Shayne stopped pacing. "Hatcheck girls? What about hatcheck girls?"

"Mary had to fill in for the hatcheck girl one night," Sheila Lenihan said.

"When?" Shayne said.

"Well, I guess it was two nights before she ran away. I remember she came home so late I was asleep. That was why she didn't go into work the next day and Mr. Mortimer had to call her."

"And she was very scared," Shayne said slowly.

Hanley looked grim. "Shayne, she was looking for a man for months. I think she found him, and he didn't want to be found. He paid her off, but she didn't trust him, so she ran."

"Maybe," Shayne said, and he thought of George Bix. So far there had been no trace of Bix in Mary Grimaldi's life. If he mentioned Bix, Hanley would jump to the obvious conclusion. But if George Bix was really the man Mary had been looking for, why would he kill her to hide his connection, and then come to Shayne? It would be insane of Bix.

"I'm sure of it," Hanley said. "I think I'll just talk to all her friends again. It could be one of them."

"You do that," Shayne said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Take a drive," Shayne said.

The redhead walked out of the office. In the corridor he lighted a cigarette. He had a peculiar hunch, one that he did not like very much.

IX

IT WAS ONLY two hours before dawn when the lights finally went out inside *The Red Pelican.* Shayne waited in his car for another fifteen minutes. Then he silently left the car and glided up to the side entrance of the club that was in a dark alley. He opened the locked door with one of the special keys on his ring.

Inside he listened. There was no sound. Shayne went along the back corridor until he reached the side door to Roger Mortimer's private office. Again he listened, used his keys, and got the door open. With his flashlight on he began to search the office.

For a long time he found nothing. He was about to give up when the beam of his light fell on the rug. Just behind Roger Mortimer's desk there were four indentations in the thick rug. Shayne looked at the desk. It was a heavy desk with a flat front that reached all the way to the floor.

It was out of balance where it stood, and Shayne could see that it belonged farther back toward the windows—just where the marks on the rug showed that it had been not too long ago.

Shayne pushed hard and moved the desk.

On the rug, where it had been hidden by the desk, there was a light patch—the rug had been cleaned at that spot. Shayne took a small, razor-sharp knife from his pocket and cut the rug directly through the cleaned spot. On the floor beneath there was a faint stain and darker stains in the cracks between the boards.

Shayne stood up. He looked again at the desk itself. Suddenly he realized that the desk was a new one.

The sudden light almost blinded him.

The office was a blaze of light. Shayne turned to face Roger Mor-

timer and Jake Mann. Mortimer was smiling. Jake Mann held a large .45 caliber automatic pointed straight at Mike Shayne. Mortimer looked at the cut rug.

"Destroying property," Mortimer said. "Breaking and entering. Really, Shayne."

"You probably got most of it out of the rug, Mortimer, but there'll be traces in the floor. You should have replaced the floor, too."

"Traces of what, Shayne?" Mortimer said.

"Blood," Shayne said. "What was wrong with the old desk Marks on it? Bullet holes, maybe?"

"What do you want, Shayne?" Mortimer said.

"You," Shayne said. "What did the Grimaldi girl do, walk in on you?"

Roger Mortimer motioned to Jake Mann. The bodyguard prodded Shayne to a chair in the corner that was out of sight from the windows. Mortimer drew the curtains. Then the gambler turned to face Shayne.

"I told you I knew nothing about the Grimaldi girl."

"In a way I believe you," Shayne said, his eyes watching Jake Mann carefully. "She meant nothing at all to you. She just saw something, didn't she? Who did you kill in this office?"

"You're crazy!" Mortimer snapped.

"No, I figure Gentry has an unsolved corpse on his hands that could be traced to you if he had a clue—or a witness."

Jake Mann swore. "Let me shut him up, boss!"

"Hold it, Jake! Not here, damn it," Mortimer said. The gambler turned back to Shayne. "Go on, what else do you have on your mind."

"Not here is smart, Roger," Shayne said. "I suppose the killing was sort of an accident. The boys got too rough, right? The Grimaldi girl was working late, she walked in on you, and she saw the corpse. You paid her off, but you knew she could hang you. So you killed her."

Mortimer's voice was silken. "Can you prove that?"

"Maybe," Shayne said. "The Grimaldi girl worked here two months. Then just two days after she fills in on a new job, works late, she is so scared she runs and hides. She had five hundred dollars on her when she died. You called her the morning after she had worked late. There's blood on your floor. It adds up, Mortimer. Gentry will have the corpse."

Jake Mann swore again. "The hell he will. We got that jerk planted so deep they'll . . ."

"Shut up, Jake!" Mortimer shouted.

"Ah, hell, boss, the peeper ain't gonna tell no one," Mann said with a snarl.

Mortimer suddenly laughed. "I

suppose you're right, Jake. Besides, with the girl dead, there isn't any proof. Even the blood won't help, Shayne. I could let you walk out of here. Like you said, it was sort of an accident. The bum wouldn't pay his losses, so Jake here worked him over. He bled too much, and banged his stupid head on the desk.

"He wasn't dead when the girl walked in. He died later, but she saw us working him over. The stupid broad didn't know what she should do with the tips, so she walked right in to ask me! How dumb could she be? I paid her off, but then I got to thinking about the way she was always asking questions, and it worried me considerably."

"So you had her killed," Shayne said.

"Me, Shayne? You know me and Jake was up in Port Sun Beach," Mortimer said with a grin.

"Yes," Shayne said, "that was why I knew it had to be you. You and Jake were the only ones with a real, prepared alibi. I guess it was Jake the landlady saw watching her place where the Grimaldi girl was hiding out. He had to find her to finger her for your killer, didn't he."

"What killer, Shayne? Are you nuts? Jake never fingered anyone," Mortimer said.

"Not directly, of course," Shayne said. "But he had to know where she was so he could tell the contact man."

Jake Mann had been listening with his face getting darker and darker. Now the big bodyguard stepped toward Shayne, the .45 pointed steady.

"He knows too damn much, boss. That landlady maybe did see me. I ain't taking no chances."

Mortimer shrugged. "I suppose you're right, Jake. There's no evidence, but why take a chance. Okay, let's get the smart Shamus out of here. We . . ."

That was as far as Roger Mortimer got. There were just two shots. They came from the window, from behind the drawn curtains. No one in the room had noticed the curtains slowly open a few inches.

Roger Mortimer went down without a sound, shot directly through the heart.

Jake Mann had time to half-turn toward the window before the shot struck him in the left side of his forehead and came out the back leaving a gaping, bloody wound. Mann crawled a few inches on the floor before he died.

Mike Shayne dived for the floor.

But there were only the two shots.

The detective scrambled to his feet and ran, crouched over, to the windows. He drew back the curtains. All he saw in the slowly greying dawn was the red taillights of a car driving away. He

looked at the windows. One was wide open.

The window was barred, but a neat circle of glass had been cut out near the lock. There were faint powder burns on the window sill where a long-barrelled pistol had rested. Two empty shells were on the ground under the windows.

By the time Lieutenant Hanley had arrived, removed the bodies of Mann and Mortimer, and questioned Mortimer's other gunmen his men had rounded up on Shayne's call, the sun was coming up over Miami. Shayne felt very tired. Hanley was more than a little annoyed.

"Damn it, Shayne, you got them killed! Why didn't you tell me what you were doing?"

"It was only a hunch," Shayne said, "I was coming to get you when they stopped me. I owed it to my client to be sure."

"Gentry'll be mad, Mike," Hanley said. "We know who the guy they beat up and killed was. Mortimer's boys talked. A two-bit punk gambler named Nick Riordan. But we'll never prove they killed the Grimaldi girl."

"You couldn't have proven it anyway," Shayne said. "But they had her killed, all right. They admitted it. Now I guess we better pick up the man who killed them."

Hanley stared at Shayne. "You mean you know who killed them? What are we standing here for!"

"He doesn't want to get away, Hanley," Shayne said. "If he had wanted to get away he could have killed me, but he didn't. He'll let you know who he is, unless you'd rather go and find him."

"I'd rather! You mean you know where he is?"

"I think so," Shayne said. "Is that Father Paul still in Miami?"

"No, he went back to Jacksonville last night."

"Then let's go."

"Where?"

"To Jacksonville," Shayne said.

The redhead led Hanley out of *The Red Pelican* to his car. Hanley followed in a squad car with three of his men. It was a long drive to Jacksonville. St. Bridget's Convent was just outside the city itself.

X

IN THE CHAPEL of St. Bridget's Convent there was a Mass being celebrated. A solemn Requiem Mass. But the chapel was empty. Only Father Paul stood at the alter conducting the Mass. The priest did not turn around as Mike Shayne and Lieutenant Hanley and his men walked into the dim church.

Shayne let his eyes rove slowly around the dim interior. He saw the small man sitting far over in the corner of a long pew near the altar. George Bix turned as Shayne came toward him followed by Hanley. There was a long-bar-

relled revolver in the killer's hand.

"That's far enough for now, Shayne," Bix said softly. "You too, Hanley. And keep your men back, I don't want to hurt no one, but the Father got to finish first."

Shayne sat down in the pew behind George Bix. Hanley sat beside Shayne. Shayne nodded toward the priest intoning the solemn requiem.

"For her?" Shayne said.

Bix nodded. "Yeh, for her. You did a good job, Shayne. Thanks."

"Your real name is Grimaldi?"

"Yeh, Antonio Grimaldi. We're Corsican, you know? That's how it started. I was just a kid myself and I killed this guy, a vendetta. I had to. It was for the family. For us it was right, but the French call it murder, so I had to run. When I got here I was still wanted. I had a wife, a kid, you know? So I did the work, killing. Fifteen years I been doing it, contract killing. I always figured I'd have to pay, only not like this."

"Mary was your daughter?"

Bix nodded. "You know how it works. I never knew who I killed or why. The contact man gave me the contract and paid me off. I never knew who hired me, or who I had to kill. After a kill I'd watch the papers to see if I'd done a clean job. I saw her name, the St. Bridget's medal. I knew what I'd done!"

The chanting of the Requiem Mass was low in the dim church.

Hanley sat and listened to Bix with his mouth half open. Bix passed his hands over his eyes as he watched the priest.

"I guessed most of it," Shayne said, "when no one seemed to know you. You couldn't have been close to Mary. It wasn't a frame-up or there would have been evidence against you. I couldn't figure what you were up to. Then I remembered that you didn't come to me until after the story was in the paper. If she had been your girl friend you should have known sooner that she was dead. You just didn't know who you had killed until it came out in the paper."

"Yeh, you're smart," Bix said, "I counted on that. I didn't care if you caught me too."

"I should have guessed you

were following me," Shayne said. "I wasn't careful enough."

"I was right behind you all the way," Bix said, "only don't blame yourself, Shayne. That's my work. I knew you'd find me sooner or later, but you'd find the guys who hired me first, and they were the guys I wanted. My contact man wouldn't ever talk, and I wanted the guys who made me kill my own kid!"

The small killer's voice had risen in the church. Then Bix seemed to catch himself, look toward where Father Paul was ending the Mass.

"My wife died," Bix said, low now and toneless, "I took the kid here to St. Bridget's. I didn't want her to know who I was."

"But she wanted to know who she was," Shayne said. "All she had were those envelopes. They took her to Mortimer's place, and she just saw too much. Then he hired you."

"All right! I killed her," Bix cried, "but I didn't know! At least I got them. May they rot in hell."

At the altar Father Paul was silent. The Mass was over. The Priest turned in his robes to face George Bix and Mike Shayne and the police. Bix looked at him.

"Thanks, Father," Bix said. "For her, okay? I don't figure there'll be no requiem for me."

The small killer suddenly laughed. "I guess I had some big punishment coming. Only not like that, not that bad. Not Mary!"

The pistol in Bix's hand wavered. Shayne saw too late that the killer had something in his other hand. Bix brought his left hand to his mouth and swallowed. Shayne stood up.

"No!" Bix said, his pistol steady again. "Just stay put another minute, just another minute."

In the church no one moved. The silence was as thick as the gloom inside the dim interior. Minutes seemed like hours. Then, suddenly, George Bix dropped his pistol and fell over.

"Mary . . ." the small killer said. "Mary . . . If only I had known . . ."

Then he was dead.

Father Paul came down from the altar and picked up the pistol. He closed the staring dead eyes of George Bix. He handed the pistol to Shayne.

"He was wrong about many things," Father Paul said, "but he has been terribly punished. Perhaps he'll have his requiem somewhere."

Shayne nodded and took the pistol. He gave it to Lieutenant Hanley. Then he walked out into the sunlight.

The footsteps kept coming nearer . . . and Agatha was alone in the house.

THE PROWLER

by DAVID H. ZINMAN

THE FRONT DOOR closed noiselessly, and the faint footsteps started mounting the stairs. Even from her bed, Agatha could tell it was not her husband. Geoffrey had

a sprightly walk. His shoes made quick sounds. These steps were slow and measured and so light they were nearly soundless.

Agatha sat up in bed. The only noise came from the rain outside and the creaking wooden stairs that bore the weight of the climbing intruder. The transparent darkness streamed around her white body. Could she be dreaming? She shut her eyes, sucked in her breath, and listened.

The footfalls were a little nearer now.

Her first thought was to cry out. Mr. Lieberman, the bachelor in the house next door, was a light sleeper. But if it were a prowler, she would be revealing her presence. Her scream would either drive him out or send him bounding into the room to silence her. She was not ready to gamble so soon. And it was questionable whether her voice could be heard through the driving rain outside.

So she stayed motionless, listening to the sound that charted the intruder's position in the dark.

From the faintness of the creaks, Agatha knew he had not reached the sharp turn in the staircase. That would be a test. A wrought iron stand was in the corner, its long, spider-like legs extending into the landing. Her husband always walked up the stairs next to the railing and automatically turned left at the landing. A prowler wandering in the dark might

very easily fail to see the stand.

Agatha remembered hearing five squeaks. That would put him three steps from the landing. She held out three fingers and stared into the blackness, trying to visualize each step, counting in a whisper. One . . . two . . . three . . . The house was perfectly still. Outside, the rain sailed through the warm darkness, touching the still oak trees. Then, she remembered. When she had driven home tonight, she had noticed that the front door had been slightly ajar.

Her first impression was that she had not closed it all the way when she had rushed out. She had been late for the Braham's party. And because she had been slightly tipsy on returning, she hadn't given the door a second thought.

In fact, she was so tired, she had gone right up and flopped into bed in her slip. But now, listening in the dark, she wondered if the prowler had not entered the house when she was gone. And maybe

now he was coming back for her.

There was a small muffled sound, somewhat indistinct, but not a footstep. It sounded like the rasp of steel on wood. Then, there was silence.

Agatha felt a welling shock of fear pressing against her stomach. It forced it way upward into her heart and hammered at her brain. She wanted to throw up but she was paralyzed. White, green and red spots whirled in the black void before her and the faint scraping noises from downstairs echoed in her ear-drum like a cymbal. She felt the blood rush from her brain and she dipped her head and fought to keep from fainting.

Then, the spots slowly stopped. The room returned and the sounds started again. She lowered her body carefully, noiselessly, and lay back on the pillow, listening to the padding footsteps.

There was no longer any doubt in her mind. There was a prowler in the house. He was coming to the second floor.

"Think, think, think," Agatha said to herself. "Must keep your wits. Must keep your wits."

Her escape was blocked. She was at the dead end of the hall. There was no fire escape or back stairs. It was too late to run to the attic. She was trapped in her room. If she were to hide, she would have to do it within these four walls.

She looked around. It was too black to see clearly. But in the dark, she knew about where the two walk-in closets were. She also knew the position of the old cedar chest at the foot of the bed. There were Danish dressers lining the walls with plenty of room beneath them. There was the bed itself. And the windows had floor-length draperies.

One thing was certain. She couldn't stay in bed. It had to be a choice of one of these five hiding places. And she had to choose quickly. She ruled out the closet and the cedar chest because she didn't know how long she'd have to hide and her air supply could exhaust. She would have no trouble breathing behind the folds of the draperies, but the window was open and a sudden gust could reveal her. It was either the bed or the dresser. She chose the bed.

Agatha slipped carefully from underneath her quilt. She got on her knees and crawled slowly under the bed. Even though the floor was carpeted, the rock hardness of the wood bit into her chest and stomach. Dust from the bedboards tickled her nose and made her want to sneeze. It was too late to change. She turned on her back and touched the mattress with her fingertips some few inches above. It was pitch black beneath the bed and she felt as if she were sealed in her coffin.

Suddenly, she realized she had overlooked the most obvious thing. In her purse, she had a

switch-blade knife with a four-inch blade. Geoffrey had given it to her because he was frequently away on business. But she had put the purse in the night-table drawer, and had forgotten it in her haste. It was her only weapon.

It was too risky now to climb from her hiding place and pull open the table drawer. She didn't want to take a chance on the noise giving her away. And even if she had the knife, she wondered if she had the courage to use it. So she stayed where she was and listened again.

The house was perfectly still. The prowler apparently had stopped at the top of the stairs, pausing now, deciding which way to turn. He was at a three-way cross-road. To his right was the den. Straight ahead was the bathroom, and to his left the bedroom. She mustn't panic she told herself. She must keep her wits. Stay very still. Think. Think about anything to keep from screaming.

Think about the house. Why was she in this look-alike subdivision in the first place? Was it because living was cheaper in the suburbs? No. She was here because of the Armstrong Company's new plant. They had moved from the city so Geoffrey wouldn't have to battle his way back and forth through rush-hour traffic every day. It had solved that problem, but that didn't mean she liked it. Who ever heard of building houses exactly alike on each block? Maybe it was saving money in the long run.

But it was depressing coming home and seeing your house in a block full of two-story brick veneer picture-window homes lined up shoulder to shoulder like army tents. The worst thing was when you got an unimaginative neighbor who copied your floor plan, adding more expensive furniture. When you went visiting, you couldn't escape the feeling this was the way your house should have been furnished if you had the money.

The sounds started again. They were coming toward the bedroom. They were coming deliberately as if the man were walking a tight-rope, as if he wanted to be sure he had his footing with each shoe before he picked up the other one.

She turned toward the door to try to see his shoes as they stepped into the room. But it was pitch black and she could only follow the sounds. The prowler stopped at the doorway and she could imagine him peering into the room. The one consolation was if she could not see him clearly in the darkness, it would be just as hard for him to spot her.

The steps came to the bed and stopped again. The figure leaned over and felt the empty covers. He stood still for a moment, then turned toward the closet and opened it. He moved inside and started swishing among the dress-

es. Then, he went across the room to the other closet and sifted through Geoffrey's clothes. He walked to the cedar chest at the foot of the bed, and she could hear him opening and shutting it. There was a murmur. It sounded as if he had cursed.

Suddenly, she heard the spring squeak and felt the bed vibrate over her. The prowler was sitting on the edge of the bed. There was silence again. And in the silence, she could hear his breathing. She lay still, not daring to move. A numbness crept up her legs and spread to her spine. Dust clogged her nostrils and she fought against sneezing. How long would he stay there?

The springs were vibrating again. He was walking around the room. He went to the window and then the footsteps moved in their slow, measured way out of the bedroom toward the den. Agatha breathed more easily for a minute.

There were two things she could do. She could get the knife and she could phone the police. The phone was on the night table. Which to do first? Either way she would be risking making a noise. But if she secured the knife, at least she would have a weapon if something unexpected happened.

She dragged her body slowly toward the table. It was a fragile old teakwood piece with its drawer about three feet off the floor. There were two ways she could open the drawer. If she stood up and opened it she would have better leverage on her feet. But she would be revealing herself at the same time. The other choice was to stay half-hidden under the bed and reach up with one hand. That would be safer, Agatha thought.

She wriggled out from under the bed. She was shaking violently. It was all she could do to support her body's weight. She balanced her twitching body on one elbow and stretched upward, reaching the wooden knob with her right hand.

She pulled on the knob gently, but the drawer would not open. The humidity from the heavy rain had made it stick fast. Agatha braced her left hand against one leg of the table and slowly tugged at the drawer again. It stayed shut. She tugged a little harder. Still it refused to open.

She clenched her teeth and gave a quick jerk. There was a tiny screeching sound and the drawer opened. Had he heard it? Her hands opened her purse, and closed around the knife. She ducked back under the bed.

There was the sound of footsteps. They were moving fast toward the bedroom. They came to the door and stopped. Then, they started again, slowly and deliberately, to the side of the bed. Agatha opened the knife's razor-sharp blade, clenched her fingers around the bone handle, and inched cau-

tiously to the far side of the bed. The prowler was between her and the door. She heard one knee strike the floor. She knew he had discovered her.

She put the knife down and braced her hands against the bed frame. She heard the second knee thud. Though her eyes were shut tight, she knew that even now he was peering into the dusty blackness below the bed. With all her strength, she pushed against the bed frame and shoved it. She felt it crack against his head and topple over his already off-balance frame. Agatha grabbed the knife, rolled clear of the bed and dashed for the door.

Through the corner of her eye, she could see the figure struggling to get to his feet. He was reaching for her as she darted by the bed, running in her bare feet, her slip streaming in the night. But she was past him and out into the hallway. She took the turn by the bathroom and started down the steps in her bare feet.

She heard his footsteps pounding behind her and the wheezing of his straining breath. She knew she would never have time to stop long enough at the bottom of the stairs to open the front door.

Suddenly, a table crashed to the floor. She had hit it with jarring impact that seemed to clear her head. In this split second, she knew she held the advantage. He had heard a sound in the dark. But she knew what had made the sound and where the table lay. It sprawled legs up between her and his rushing form. In the blackness and at the speed he was coming, the odds were he would not see it.

She decided to gamble. It was her last chance. She whirled, braced herself against the wall and held the knife out in the dark. It glistened in the night and she brought her other hand up and doubled it around the handle, waiting. The knife hung in the still air, shining, moving. He must have seen it glinting as he spun into the blackness. He twisted like a top in a frantic effort to avoid it.

But there was nothing he could do. He had spotted the table too late. His ankle locked in its frame and he plunged downward head first. He came with the full force of his body, hurtling through the black void, upon the spear. There was a terrible moment of utter silence as if the scene were unreal and the whole episode would turn into a dream. Then came a voice, real and shrill and agonized like a doomed animal. For one terrifying second, he semeed to have parried the vicious wound, to have withstood the terrible blow, writhing to free himself from the thrust that had left him impaled, shivering like a great hooked sea creature bobbing about in a kind of macabre dance.

She knew that he was dying. The wound was so deep that life

ran from his body like water. He collapsed, a puppet let go, a final hoarse moan rushing from his throat as he hit the floor. The knife had driven to the hilt under the soft flesh of the chin.

WITH THE HOUR and the darkness remote as another world, Agatha heard, as if from a distant source, the rain drumming ceaselessly from out of the gulfs of space. The city slept under its hypnotic beat. She struggled to raise herself and shuffled unsteadily from the prostrate form. Moving through the shadows of the blue-hued room, she forced herself to cross the carpeted foyer and touch the switch. The room came to life with a white blaze that shocked her.

But it was not the sudden light that jolted her. Even as she covered her eyes, waiting for them to become accustomed to the light, she knew from her instant glance that the table was not where it should have been. The bookcase was about five feet too high. And the sofa was done with an orange denim cover that she would not have tolerated.

Without looking at the man on the floor, she shuddered at the chilling horror of the moment of discovery. She was in Mr. Lieberman's house.

Some of Next Month's Headliners

THE MOGHUL BOX by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Novelet

THE HICK FUZZ by ED LACY

A New Shocking Suspense Novelet

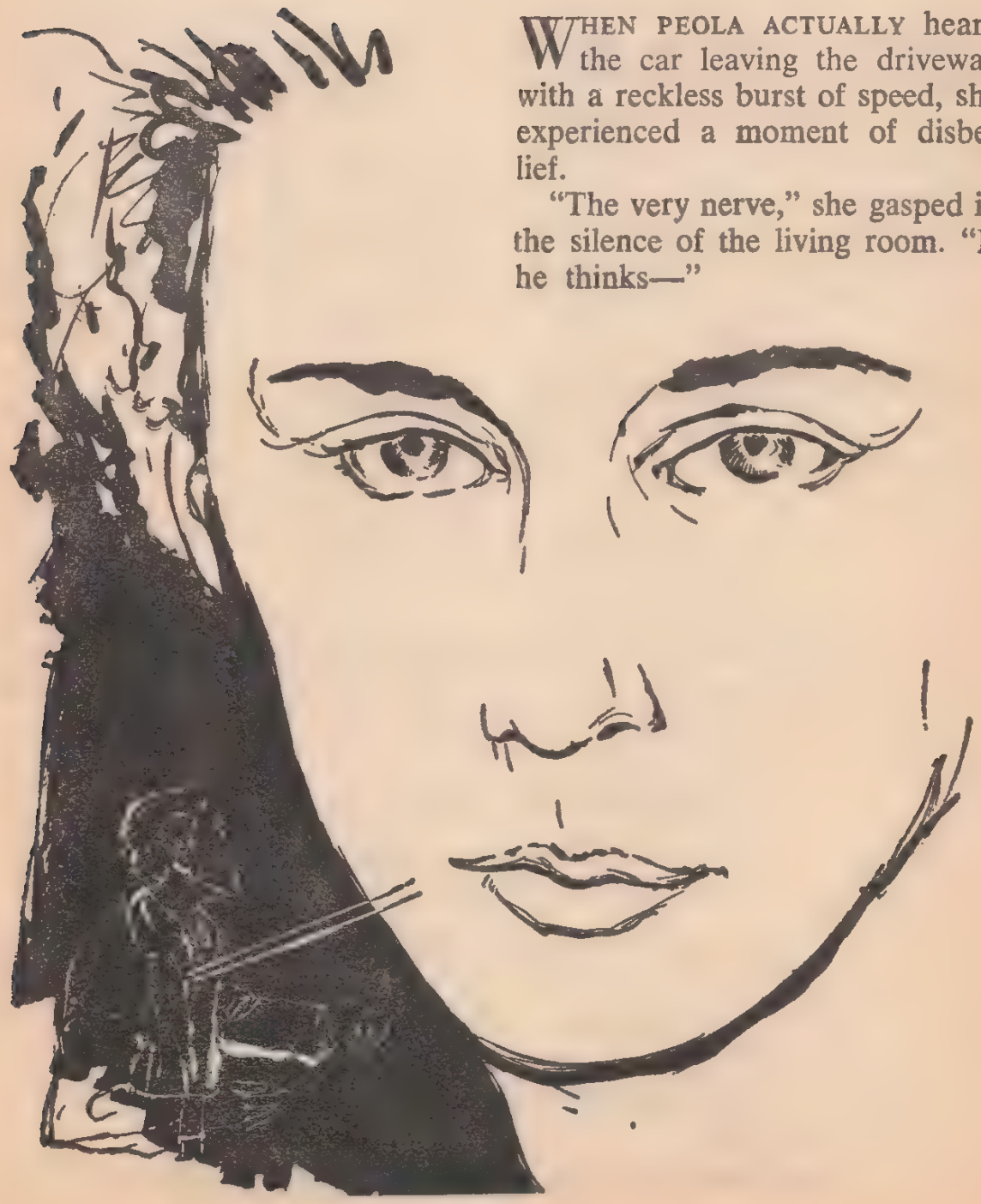
MR. POLICEMAN by JACK RITCHIE

BY HIS HAND by MAX VAN DERVEER

THE WIG by DOROTHY MADLEE

HAMILTON'S END by LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

Presentiment of Evil



WHEN PEOLA ACTUALLY heard the car leaving the driveway with a reckless burst of speed, she experienced a moment of disbelief.

"The very nerve," she gasped in the silence of the living room. "If he thinks—"

The quarrel of the young honeymooners didn't greatly alarm Deputy Constable Newsom . . . until a grim prophecy made him hear a funeral bell distantly tolling.

by TALMAGE POWELL

And then suddenly, none of it was quite real, neither the rustic surroundings nor the silence that was the aftermath of the scene with Kenny. It was as if she had briefly stepped outside of herself and become a spectator, glimpsing a shadowy truth about the people directly involved in the action.

The fleeting impression transformed her pique into something quite different and much more urgent. She rushed to the door, jerking it open in time to see the car skid onto the narrow village road.

"Wait, Kenny . . ."

Without slackening speed, the car straightened and disappeared in the cloudy, summer night.

Peola's voice became a near scream. "Kenny, you mustn't go! Kenny, *you'll be killed!*"

It took her a full minute to realize that he was already gone, that she could do nothing.

Peola slowly turned to the living room, moving with the detached gracefulness of a sleepwalker. A slender, delicately made young woman with pale blonde hair that accented her sensitive beauty, she sank to the edge of the couch and wept silently and despairingly.

But this is no good, she told herself. This cowardly yielding to fear; this helpless spilling of tears.

Instead, she must be canny, cunning, cool. She had to think carefully, and analytically. Her problem was not merely to outwit another human being. Somehow, she must trick fate and its designs on Kenny. She must find him, and quickly.

She shivered as she realized the distinct mental impression she'd

received when she'd stood on the porch calling after his departing car.

Kenny, you'll be killed.

Kenny, you will not come again into this house while you are alive. This is as certain as the winking of a cold and distant star, unless we can contrive to rearrange the pattern.

Her shouted warning had burst spontaneously from her lips, as if she had had no part in forming the words, but had instead been nothing more than an unwilling instrument that had given them utterance. Like a TV set, she thought, responding to an unseen electronic impulse shot into it from the vacancy of space.

She got uncertainly to her feet. She felt slightly ill, and a small ache was throbbing between her temples. The physical after-effects were not wholly new to her. They always plagued her when the mysterious thing in her mind roused itself for an obscured glimpse of the future.

She moved to the telephone, lifted it, and dialed for a taxi to come up from the village. While she waited, she went into the bathroom to repair the damage of the tears. Returning to the living room, she picked up the small handbag she'd left earlier on the mantel above the huge, fieldstone fireplace. She was standing outside on the small porch when the taxi arrived.

The cocktail lounge in the resort hotel at the head of the lake was crowded as usual. Stylized piano arpeggios and the murmur of conversation washed against Peola as she stood in the foyer, her gaze searching for Kenny's face.

They had spent several pleasant hours here during the past week. She had convinced herself he would be here. Weren't men supposed to head for a bar and ease their pique by making a confidant of the overly polite bartender.

"Good evening, Mrs. Collins."

Peola turned, acknowledging with a nod the greeting of a smiling waiter. "Has my husband been here this evening?" she asked.

The waiter shook his head. "Not yet, Mrs. Collins. If you'd care to wait, I think I can manage a table for you."

"Wait?" It seemed like a good idea. Kenny had probably started out driving aimlessly. It would take a few minutes for him to decide on the obvious destination.

"You're rather crowded," she said. "I'll just wait at the bar."

She made her way through the crowded, dimly-lighted room. At the bar, she slid onto one of the high stools.

"Hello, Mrs. Collins." Tim Randall, the bartender, was a small, neat man who managed to wear a barman's jacket with a dash of sartorial elegance.

"I'm waiting for Mr. Collins," Peola said.

"Fine. Would you care for something meanwhile?"

"Yes, I think so. Something strong, Tim. A double martini with a kiss of Vermouth."

Tim studied her covertly as he stirred the drink. When he set the tall-stemmed glass before her, Peola said, "Why were you looking at me like that?"

"Like what, Mrs. Collins?"

"You know," she said. "Do I look ill or something?"

"You are a bit pale," Randall admitted.

"We had a fight, Tim." She drank half the martini, caught her breath, finished the drink, and slid the empty glass toward him. "Refill, please."

"Mrs. Collins . . ."

"Married a week, and fighting already. What's to become of us, Tim?"

"I wouldn't worry about the first little tiff," Randall said. "It's more or less inevitable."

"Why should it be?"

The bartender smiled. "Sort of emotional letdown, I guess. Not being married myself, I wouldn't know for sure."

"I didn't want it to be this way."

"You'll forget it ever happened in a day or so, Mrs. Collins." He completed preparation of the second drink, served it to her.

Peola watched the shimmering reflection of light on the surface of the cocktail. "It was very lovely for awhile, Tim."

"It will be again, when the air is cleared."

"The air has been dirtied beyond purification. I should have known. Nothing really lovely is mine for keeps."

"Some people would say you have everything, Mrs. Collins."

She looked at him slowly. "You too, Tim? Even you? Why do you rebuke me?"

"I was trying to cheer you up. I'm sorry if it sounded like a rebuke, Mrs. Collins."

"I'm sorry also."

"You'll feel better when things are patched up."

"But I don't want patched-up things. I want someone to value *me*. For myself, Tim. Not for the things I have. Not the material offering I can make. Dear God, I want to be *valued!*"

"Mrs. Collins . . ."

"Do you know why I was an absolute brat as a child?"

"I'm sure you were a fine kid."

"My parents never took the time to find out. I thought brattishness would bring the reward of some kind of attention—any kind of attention."

"Most kids try the stunt at one time or another."

"I made a career of it. I must have had a dozen governesses before I was finally packed off to a private school. They couldn't

stomach the brat, any more than I could bear them. Except for one. She understood, Tim. She *knew*. A personal problem took her away. Sickness in her family, I think it was."

Peola Collins lifted the glass, drained it. "Do you know what I was? I was the bratty little accident resulting from the intimate relations of two dreadfully wealthy people."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Collins."

A faint curl came to her lips as Peola watched Tim escape to a customer down the bar.

Good boy, Tim, she thought grimly. You endured the boredom and took flight gracefully. A real pro among bartenders.

Shifting on the stool, Peola watched the dim foyer for the sight of Kenny's lanky body, his boyish face.

The sense of loneliness inside her became acute. It might have happened already, she thought. Somewhere in the silent night the prophecy might already have come to pass.

ON NIGHT DUTY, Deputy Constable Theobald Newsom pegged the pale blonde young woman who stepped into his office as a guest of the hotel or one of the more expensive private cottages. Years of service in the exclusive resort community had sharpened Newsom's instincts, his eye for details. He was instantly impressed by the woman's grooming, the expression of a fine designer's hand in the casual simplicity of her brown linen dress, the way she had of moving and looking at him.

As he got to his feet, Newsom frowned slightly. Her appearance at this hour, shortly before midnight, was an indication that his job, normally a comfortably inactive sinecure, was going to be marred by the prospect of work.

"Are you the officer in charge?" she asked.

A big, pleasant-looking man, Newsom glanced before replying through the tall window of the office, seeing the taxi which had brought her here and which she had kept waiting.

"I'm Constable Newsom," he said in carefully polite tones. "What can I do for you?"

"It's about my husband."

As she came forward, the constable's nose caught the pungency of gin. His foreboding lessened. Too much money, he thought. Too much time lying heavily on her hands. Booze. Husband. A petty squabble.

"Please sit down," he said.

She ignored his gesture toward the chair beside his desk. "I'm Peola Collins," she said. "Mrs. Kenneth Collins. I need your help."

"That's what we get paid for," Newsom said, nodding.

Standing before him, she leaned forward slightly, her slim, long-fingered hands tightly gripping a small handbag. "I don't think you understand. My husband is in extreme danger."

Newsom didn't like the sound of that. "Somebody been making threats?"

"No, nothing like that. Earlier tonight . . . we had an argument. He left the house in anger. I've searched the village for him, beginning at the hotel. No one had seen him."

Newsom sneaked a relaxed breath through his heavy lips. "I wouldn't worry," he said, reassuringly. "He's probably driving around the lake in a sulk. When he cools off, he'll come home."

"He won't return home alive, Constable."

The tormented look in her eyes kept the statement from sounding ridiculously melodramatic. Newsom swallowed slowly. "Why do you say that?"

She came a little closer to the desk that separated them. "Do you believe in ESP, Constable Newsom?"

He thought that over for a moment. Quite obviously she'd had a couple of drinks to stifle the silent, inner screams. But she wasn't drunk.

"Extra-sensory perception, clairvoyance, telekinesis?" he said. "I know that the evidence for the existence of paranormal phenomena has impressed a great many reputable scientists."

"Then you must believe me," she said on a note of desperation. "All my life I've had this—this gift, or whatever you wish to call it. I never know when or how it will come to me. It doesn't happen often—perhaps four or five times in my entire life."

Newsom nodded again, his face impassive.

"I was a child the first time it happened," she went on earnestly. "A governess of mine was called away by the illness of a member of her family. When she told me, I saw her suddenly, and for the barest instant, with a wooden arm."

"And what happened?"

"Hurrying through her last minute chores before packing, she tripped over one of my roller skates. She fell and broke her arm. Another time—a mongrel dog strayed into our backyard.

My mother said he would have to go. I refused obstinately. Then one day I saw him with blood on his mouth. During a romp, he darted into the boulevard, and was killed."

"Mrs. Collins," Newsom said, frowning, "anybody can go back, pick out a tragedy, and wonder if he had some prior presentiment concerning it."

Her smile was touched with an almost gentle sympathy and tolerance for his ignorance. "I have never been confused, Constable. If anything, I've tried to deny the truth to myself. But the truth is that the presentiment always precedes the event. My own father had . . ."

"Yes, Mrs. Collins?"

"Once I received the impression that he was stifling. Later when we were together during a summer vacation, he almost drowned swimming to my rescue when I was taken with a stomach cramp."

"And your husband?"

"Tonight . . . the argument began when I expressed the doubt that he loved me—*really* loved me. In the time-honored tradition, the quarrel generated more anger and built to quite a furious peak.

"When he rushed from the house, I had a vision of him impaled on a metal rod. I heard myself shouting a warning. Now you must find him, before it is too late."

"Metal rod. Could that be the steering column of an automobile?"

The bones of her cheeks seemed to grow more prominent as the flesh collapsed. "Perhaps, Constable."

"Which is your cottage, Mrs. Collins?"

"It's the one they call Moonfair."

"Yes, I know the place. I'd advise you to return there and do your best to relax. I'll start looking for your husband right away."

"Thank you."

He came around the desk, took her arm, guided her to the door. He watched from the open doorway as she got into the taxi and started off.

THE COTTAGE WAS dark, the driveway empty, when Peola returned. She went inside as the taxi drove away. After turning on the table lamp beside the living-room door, she wandered to the fireplace and dropped her handbag on the mantel.

She remained motionless for a moment, looking about the empty room. Then she crossed to the television set and flipped the switch, preferring sound—any kind of sound—to the silence which had greeted her on entering the house.

Without bothering to see what was on the glowing tube, she wandered aimlessly about, unable to relax. With the intrusion of pounding

hooves and popping sixguns breaking the silence she poured herself a drink and carried it to the ceiling-high front windows. Pushing back the draperies, she sipped the drink slowly and stared out at the darkness over lake and mountains.

She saw a moving point of light against the far mountainside, like the tip of a white hot needle. It disappeared as the road curved. When it was again visible, the spark had grown and divided. Two specks of light now. The headlights of a car.

Peola's fingers began to bunch slowly on the edge of the drapery, crushing the material. She watched the headlights grow until they were huge, throwing back the darkness. She saw them pause and wheel and start up the driveway.

Her pressure caused the drapery rod to creak and sag. She watched the car stop. The lights winked off, and a man got out of the car.

Constable Newsom? With word of Kenny?

Then as billowy summer clouds rifted, moonlight splashed across the front lawn. She saw that the man was Kenny.

Peola turned, set down her glass.

Kenny? How could it be? Was the entire evening some sort of macabre, torturous trick?

She went to the front door and opened it. She was framed in light. Kenny stopped, a few yards from the house.

"Kenny?" she said.

"Peola, let's not start it all over again."

Tears came to her eyes. He looked so boyish and fair with the moonlight touching him and bringing his youthful features into subdued relief.

"Of course not, Kenny."

"I hope you mean that," he said. "Because there isn't anything for us. I know it sounds rotten. Not words for a honeymoon. But we rushed into this thing without thinking, without really knowing each other. The quicker we admit we've made a terrible mistake, the better it will be."

Kenny hesitated. "I returned for my things, Peola."

"Yes, Kenny," she said quietly.

She turned and walked to the fireplace. Without hesitation, she picked up the poker from its stand. With the heavy metal rod concealed behind her, she walked unflinchingly toward the darkness outside, to a meeting with Kenny.

COMING NEXT MONTH: A NEW STORY BY MORRIS HERSHMAN

A FAMED WRITER'S CHILLING SUSPENSE THRILLER

CIGARETTE

Eddie Dean wasn't exactly an intellectual giant. But it would have been uncharitable to dismiss him as a dimwit, for he was more than a match for a killer when the chips were down.

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

TOMMY MITCHELL came out and said, "Okay, Big John is ready for you. You can go in now." He pointed over his shoulder at the room behind him.

The thin, inoffensive-looking young fellow dropped the newspaper he had been pretending to read and got up without having to be told twice. He looked a little scared. He always was when 'Big John' Bossetti sent for him like this.

"He ain't sore about anything that I—" he started to ask.

"He ain't sore," Tommy cut in tersely, "just wants to say hello to you." Tommy Mitchell said that each time, said Big John just wanted to say hello to him. Then Bossetti always had some little thing or other that he wanted Eddie Dean to do for him, never anything much. But almost always it was something Eddie couldn't understand the meaning of.

He knew better than to ask, though. That would have gotten Big John sore at him, and if Big John ever got sore he could send him back to jail. He'd said so himself plenty often.

It was in jail that they'd first met, Eddie Dean and John Bosset-

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ti. He'd been in for theft, that time his mother and the kids didn't have anything to eat in the house, and Big John had been in for being unjustly accused of killing somebody. Big John got out much sooner of course—as soon as his lawyer got around to proving that it was all a mistake.

When Eddie Dean was let out he sort of naturally gravitated toward him. In fact Bossetti let him know that it was due to him that he had been let out a little ahead of his full term, and he shouldn't forget it.

After that, by not quite getting Big John's orders straight once or twice, he had unwittingly made himself liable to another sentence, overstepped the line of the law. Big John would never explain in what way, though.

"Just a technicality," he'd say, and give Tommy the wink. Eddie Dean knew that as long as he stayed in good with Big John, everything would be okay.

He went in to Bossetti's private room and Tommy Mitchell closed the door and came in after him.

Big John had been rolling cigarettes or something, and was just putting a very small bottle away in the drawer under him when Eddie came in. Big John usually only smoked the most expensive cigars. It was funny, him rolling cigarettes, but this was another of those things it was wiser not to ask questions about.

On the table in front of Bossetti were a flat tin of cigarettes, the readymade kind that come by fifties, with a handful scooped out. There were also a pair of nail scissors, a small eyedropper, some wooden toothpicks, a little bottle of mucilage, a great many grains of spilled tobacco, and a quantity of spoiled cigarette papers—which is why Eddie thought Big John had been rolling cigarettes.

Lastly there was a brand new but not very expensive looking flat enamel cigarette case, with his initials, E. D., Eddie Dean, stamped in one corner.

John Bossetti swept everything off the table into the drawer but the initialed case. Then he turned to Dean and held out his hand in his friendly, cheery way like he always did.

"Hello, Eddie," he said. "Glad to see you. Sit down."

Tommy Mitchell, who was always with Big John, shoved forward a chair, like an executioner, for Eddie. Eddie sat as near to the edge of it as he could without falling off.

Big John pivoted on one elbow and smiled at Eddie. Then he said, "Eddie, I've got a little present for you," and picked up the flat case from the table and showed it to him.

"It works easy—once you get the knack."

He pressed the catch with his thumb, and instead of opening up

the way most cases do, a single cigarette shot up at the top of it, ready to be pulled out. "A damned clever little gadget, eh?"

John Bossetti grinned. He opened it with his thumbnail, carefully patted the protruding cigarette back in line, then clicked it shut.

Eddie stammered his thanks. He didn't smoke, but this was no time to bring that up; Big John was in good humor, was highly pleased with him, to treat him this way. But it turned out Big John knew that, anyway, like he knew everything else.

"You don't smoke, do you, Eddie?"

"No," Eddie said, "I can't on account of my lungs—"

"Sure, I know how it is with you, kid," Big John told him enigmatically. "That's why I'm giving you this." He looked down at it for awhile and seemed to change the subject. "That Miller guy I told you to get to know a month ago—how you getting along with him?"

"He doesn't warm up to people very easy. He seems to be sort of—" Eddie groped for the right word—"sort of a suspicious guy. His own brother would have a hard time getting him to relax. He's always got three or four guys with him and they don't let you get too near him."

"He thinks you want some sort of favor out of him," Big John prodded. "A soft job where you can play the suckers for more than pennyante stuff. Did you make him think that?"

"Yeah, like you told me to," Eddie nodded.

Bossetti stroked his chin, as though he were anxious to help Eddie solve his problem of getting close to Nick Miller, when as a matter of fact it had been Big John's own suggestion to start with.

"He's a big shot, Eddie," he said softly. "You want to get in good with him; get on the right side of him. Did you tell his friends last night the drinks were on you, like I advised?"

"Yeah, I did," Eddie said simply. "Only they laughed about it, like they knew I didn't have much money. One of them followed me home afterwards, I saw him from my room window."

"That's all right. That's just so they could be sure who you were," Big John said, "Now listen closely, kid. You go back there again tonight. I want you to keep on being nice to Nick Miller. Buy him and his crowd another round of drinks. Pass around your cigarettes—" he stopped and tapped the case slowly for emphasis. "Only whatever you do, *be sure you offer Miller one first*. If he's smoking a cigarette, wait till he's through with it. Don't give anyone ahead of him—he's likely to get sore if you do. Got it? And if he refuses, don't offer a cigarette to anybody else, but wait until he'll take one from you later

on. Keep offering until he takes one —the first one in the case."

Eddie thought that over, screwed up his courage, and finally went to the unparalled length of asking a question on his own hook. "But—suppose he gets feeling good-natured and asks me what the favor is I'm sucking around for? What'll I say? You ain't told me what to ask for?"

"He won't ask you. There's no danger of that. If his own mother was drowning he'd throw a glass of water in her face."

Big John shoved the case at Eddie, stripped three ten spots off a fat roll. ""This buys the drinks. Now get going and remember what I told you—see that Nick Miller takes a cigarette from you if you gotta stick with him all night. And see that he gets first crack. Another thing, if he asks you—you bought the case yourself. You paid two-fifty for it at Tracy's. Now stay with all I've been telling you and see that you get it right."

Eddie slipped the case inside his coat, folded the three tens to postage stamp size and tucked them into his watch pocket. He stood up. "Thanks, Big John," he said. "Want me to give you a ring after I leave them, so you can be sure I followed orders?"

"Okay, let me hear from you afterwards," Big John said, and Tommy added something that sounded like, "If you're not too far away."

As the door closed after Eddie Dean, they both roared with laughter.

"He'll ring up from hell," chuckled Tommy. "Wonder what the toll charges are"

"That's what's so beautiful about it," said Big John. "There's no use trying to get Miller any other way —you saw what happened the last two times. Since my mouthpiece sprang me last year, I don't think Miller even goes to the bathroom without his bodyguard. But this way, you can't even pin it on me afterwards. Instead of stopping to think that maybe they could beat something out of Eddie they're going to lose their heads when they see what happens to Miller and plug him so full of holes it'll set some new kind of record. Then they'll have lost their chance of getting him to talk!"

He gazed complacently at the chair Eddie Dean had recently been sitting on. "How can anyone be that dumb and live? I hadn't been talking to him five minutes up in the pen, when I knew he was going to come in handy some day. He's even got the right kind of a face to go with this job—so harmless that even Miller will let him stand next to him taking a drink. He's a natural. And he thanks me yet—for making a dumb patsy out of him. Not that he wasn't a ready-made pushover before I ran into him—with six inches of empty space between his ears.

Big John shook with huge enjoyment.

"C'mon, get your hat," said Big John, getting up, "We'll kill a couple of hours at the Naughty Club, invite a couple of the dames to sit with us, break glasses, kick up a row about the service, let everybody know we're there."

"I can hardly wait," smiled Tommy, snapping the brim of his felt down to his mouth, "for the midnight papers to hit the stands. Ain't we going to be surprised!"

EDDIE DEAN was whistling as he trudged along Lorillard Avenue, hands in his pockets, on his errand. He was glad Big John was pleased with him. Big John had shaken his hand and he'd just have to carry out his orders to the letter tonight.

Each time Eddie came to a street crossing he took one hand out of his trouser and touched the enamel case in his coat pocket and the thirty dollars wedged in his watch pocket to make sure they were both still there. Couldn't carry out orders if he lost either one of them.

Once he reached out, wet his thumb, and touched a lamppost in passing; that was to bring him luck. Nick Miller, whom he had to be nice to tonight, and to whom he must never mention Big John Bossetti, lived downtown with those friends of his in a flashy hotel.

Eddie had overheard a bellboy say once that they'd rented an entire floor, and had made arrangements that only one elevator was ever to stop at that floor—and then only when one of Miller's gang was using it.

Eddie couldn't go up to Miller's suite, of course. But once in a while they came down to the smaller of the two bars, especially late in the evening when it was usually deserted, and it was there he'd worked up a sort of speaking acquaintance with Nick Miller.

After they'd taken a good look at his face they'd laughed and let him stay in there with them when everyone else was sort of hinted out by the bartender. And the last time, when he'd warmed himself up to the point of inviting them all for a drink, it seemed to strike them very funny. They all spoke up and ordered milk and root beer, without, of course, drinking those things.

Eddie turned off Lorillard into Franklin, which led straight down toward Miller's hotel. It had been a little after eleven-thirty when he left Big John's place, but he still

had plenty of time. When Nick Miller came down at all, it was never until well past midnight. No use getting there too soon; he didn't care enough about drinking to stand doing it by himself waiting for them to show up. The more he saved out of the thirty bucks, the more he'd have for himself after he carried out Big John's orders.

It was already pretty late, and the streets were dead even when he got down into the heart of town. Twelve o'clock tolled from some church steeple just as he was within two blocks of the hotel. Eddie could already see it rearing up ahead of him in the darkness.

The cigar store on the next-to-the-last corner was still lighted up inside, but the lights outside flicked out as he came near it. What attracted Eddie Dean's attention was a man standing outside the locked door pounding angrily on the wire-laced glass and gesticulating to the clerk who was still visible behind the counter. The clerk was shaking his head, wouldn't make a move.

Eddie stopped to watch and the man turned and saw him.

"He can't get away with this!" he said wrathfully. "I'm going to get in there if I have to break the door down! If he hadn't been in such a hurry to lock up, I could have made it before twelve. He closed ahead of time, five-to, and now look at him standing there doing nothing!"

The clerk callously snapped off the remaining light and disappeared toward the back.

"Can't it wait till the morning?" suggested Eddie mildly.

The man shoved his hat to the back of his head, turned from the door in disgust. "I go crazy if I'm stuck like this without a cigarette—can't go to sleep." He jabbed his thumb at three lighted windows on the top floor of an apartment house opposite. "I live right across the way there; we had company tonight and must of used them all up. Anyway I didn't find I'd run out of cigarettes until five minutes ago. I beat it down here and he puts on the lock right under my nose."

He broke off short. "Say, you haven't got one on you, have you? Just one'll tide me over."

Eddie hesitated momentarily, but since Miller wasn't there to see, there didn't seem to be any danger of offending him by offering anyone else a cigarette ahead of him. Later, in Miller's own presence, of course, he would make sure of giving him first pick, ahead of his friends, so as not to belittle him.

Eddie took out the new case, pressed the lever, and a cigarette popped up at the end.

The man took it, stowed it in his breast pocket. "You're a life saver," he thanked him.

Eddie looked at him, pressed the lever a second time. "Take a couple with you," he said, "one for the morning."

He'd seen how many were in it, there were more than enough left to go around; Nick Miller never had more than four of his gang with him and Eddie himself didn't smoke.

The second one went to join the first in the man's upper pocket. He said good night, and Eddie watched him cross the street and disappear into the apartment house with the three lighted windows. He shook his head, put the case away in his pocket and went on his way.

THEY WERE IN the bar already when he got there, Miller and his three bodyguards. Everyone else had been shunted to the larger bar across the lobby as usual, but Eddie stepped in unhesitatingly. The bartender tried to head him off but Miller spoke up:

"Well if it ain't Aloysius! That's all right, let him stay. We need some comic relief in here."

Eddie grinned sheepishly and said, "Good evening, fellows." To the bartender, "Uh-uh-uh-rye highball, but not too much rye."

The laugh that went up drowned out the rest of it and he had to repeat himself so the bartender could hear him. "And find out what the rest of the boys will have."

Miller killed his drink, winked, and said, "Uh-uh-uh-sarsparilla for me." He banged his hand down. "I don't care if I do get drunk!" Another roar went up.

Eddie went over and moved in next to him. Miller snapped an imaginary grain of dust off his shoulder, said, "That's all right, pal, you're all right at that!"

The man on the other side of Eddie cooly patted him all the way down one side, then down the other. Eddie raised his elbows, stood perfectly still till he was through.

"What'd you expect to find on him," said Miller, "a water pistol?"

They all had their drinks on Eddie, and when Miller saw him carefully stowing away the change from a ten dollar bill he asked curiously, "What do you do with yourself all day, kid?"

"Nothing much," said Eddie. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Miller."

Miller said, "See my lawyer," and turned his back on him.

They all ignored Eddie for awhile after that, and when they re-ordered left him out. Eddie waited for a few minutes, then took out his cigarette case, held it halfway toward Miller.

"Care for a smoke?" he said.

Miller turned back toward him brusquely. "Quit trying to play up to me," he snapped. "It ain't going to get you a thing." A cigarette popped up from Eddie's case. Nick took it and put it in his mouth while he was speaking. "The quicker you get that straight the better off you'll be. Well, how about a light?"

Eddie put the case down, struck

a match, and Miller smothered his face in a puff of carefully aimed smoke. Eddie had a spasm of coughing that seemed to tear his chest in two. He choked down on it, afraid of antagonizing Nick Miller.

Meanwhile the fellow on the other side of him had picked up the case, helped himself, and passed it on. They all tried the trick mechanism in turn, and by the time it had reached the third one it was already broken.

He sent it skating back along the bar toward Eddie with the remark, "Why don't you get yourself a good one?"

Miller took hold of it, looked at it, and said, "Where did you pick this up, out of the ashcan?"

"I got it at Tracy's for two-fifty," memorized Eddie.

"Remind me not to go there and get one like it," Miller said. He deliberately dropped it on the floor, and when Eddie reached down to get it, his foot sent it coasting along toward the next man.

They would have made quite a game out of it, only Eddie quit trying to retrieve it after the first attempt. He straightened up and sighed patiently.

"It don't feel playful," said Miller, and once again they all ignored Eddie.

Miller smoked the cigarette Eddie had given him down to within a half-inch of his thumbnail, dropped it, and stepped on it.

"How about calling it a night?" he said, and they all filed out, one on each side of him, one in back of him, without saying good-night to Eddie. The last one to leave, however, in passing behind Eddie, tried to startle him by perpetrating a gesture that doesn't bear repetition.

The bartender howled appreciatively, then looked at Eddie Dean, whose face bore no resentment, shut up and turned away ashamed.

AS SOON AS they were gone Eddie Dean picked up his cigarette case and went out to one of the telephone booths in the lobby. He called Big John's private number and there was no answer, Tommy and Big John must be out. He wanted to report that he'd done just what he'd been told to do before he went back to his room for the night.

Tommy and John Bossetti came home much earlier than they'd intended to.

"No sense hanging around that lousy joint any longer than we did," Big John remarked. "We were there, and everybody saw us, so that's all that really matters."

Tommy Mitchell had just turned in on the studio couch outside his chief's door, when the phone rang. He got up swearing and went over to it. Annoyance became stupefaction; he nearly dropped the receiver in surprise. It was Eddie Dean. The guy was still alive!

"Big John there?" Eddie asked. "I just wanted him to know I did what he told me to. I'm on my way home now."

Tommy had to park the phone and sit down in front of it to hold it straight. "Why you—what'd you do, fumble it?" he growled.

"I bought 'em all a round of drinks and I offered Miller a cigarette first, and then all the others helped themselves," said Eddie. "Just like I was told to do."

"And Miller smoked his?" Tommy snapped.

"Down to the end, I watched him carefully—"

"How long ago was this?" Tommy interrupted, his face grim. It was just as well Eddie couldn't see it at the other end.

"About twenty minutes ago," Eddie insisted. Something was wrong, and he could feel Big John's wrath dangling over his head.

Tommy asked just one more question. "And what happened to Miller after he smoked it?"

"He finished it, stepped on it, and went upstairs—"

"You stinking fool, you're lying through your teeth!" Tommy raged. "Do you know what was in that cigarette? Cyanide of potassium!"

Eddie gave a heave at the other end that carried clear across the wire. "Now are you going to tell me what you did with it? Big John is asleep in there, but wait'll he hears about this! I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. You'll wish you hadn't been born!"

Eddie was nearly going out of his mind at the other end. "As God is my witness, I saw him take it and I even lit it for him myself. I just—"

"Don't try to tell me he got the right one! He would've dropped at your feet long before he finished it! The cyanide was in a gelatin capsule in with the tobacco and the heat would have melted it and the suction carried it into his mouth. You double-crossing punk, what'd you do with it?"

"I—I—" Only the narrowness of the booth kept Eddie from falling.

Terror of Tommy and Big John was still uppermost in his mind though, ahead of another terror that hadn't been identified yet. Anything was better than admitting he'd given the cigarette away of his own accord, bungled the thing by a positive action.

"—I must've dropped it going over," he said desperately. "I—I tried to catch on the thing to see how it worked. I remember now. Maybe it's still there, maybe I can find it again—I'll go back and look. Give me a chance, will you, Tommy? Don't tell him! Give me a little time! It must be lying there yet, nobody would pick up a cigarette off the sidewalk—"

Even while he spoke he knew he was lying, but he was half-hysterical. He didn't care what he

said if only he could postpone retribution.

"You better see that you get hold of it quick!" Tommy said in a grating voice. "And bring it back here if you want to square yourself! You know what that means, don't you?" he warned somewhat illogically but with enormous punishing-power. "If anyone gets hold of that cigarette, you'll sure as hell burn for it. You won't know how dumb you've been until they strap you into the chair."

Mitchell heard Eddie moan through chattering teeth. What he really meant was that they wanted it safely back in their hands where it couldn't be used against them as evidence.

Eddie Dean was in no condition to think clearly. Even an hour's delay was better than hearing doom pronounced on him right now at the moment.

"I'll get it for you!" he promised hoarsely. "I'll find it and bring it back. I swear I will! I know just where it must be—only don't tell Big John yet. Let me look for it and then tell him only if you have to!" Eddie's voice trailed off into a groan as he replaced the receiver with a shaking arm.

EDDIE DEAN staggered out of the booth, his face the color of clay. That guy in front of the cigar store half an hour ago—that poor harmless guy—was carrying around loaded death in his pocket—and he had given it to him!

This second terror now became uppermost, displacing the first, the minute Tommy Mitchell was no longer growling in his ear.

Eddie didn't want to kill anyone. He didn't want to become a murderer. He wouldn't even have given it to Nick Miller if he'd known what it was.

He had to get hold of that guy; maybe there was still time! It was only half-an-hour ago, only two blocks from here and he mightn't have smoked it yet. He'd given him two cigarettes, one was probably harmless—although he wasn't sure even of that.

"One for the morning," he'd said to him.

And, thank God, he knew where the fellow lived—those three light-

ed windows on the top floor of the apartment house across the way from the cigar store; two breaks, anyway. All he asked was a third —that if the guy had finished one already, it was the harmless one.

Eddie brushed the sweat out of his eyes and started running, down the steps of the hotel out to the sidewalk and up the street in the direction from which he'd strolled whistling awhile ago.

He knew that if he showed up too late he was putting his own neck in a noose, giving himself away as the anonymous killer whom otherwise they might have hunted for weeks and months without finding.

But it didn't deter him. Eddie was cowardly about a lot of little things, but he wasn't when it came to a big thing like this.

There was the closed cigar store just ahead! He cut diagonally across Franklin Avenue without waiting to get to the corner, and his eyes sought out the top floor windows of the eight story apartment house.

They were dark. He realized that might be a good sign. It must mean everything was all right instead of otherwise. If it had happened already, the place would be blazing with light, wouldn't it?

But ominous or reassuring, the blank windows had flashed past over his head already and he was in the dimly-lit lobby. He shuffled back and forth in front of the mailboxes. Top-floor front, there it was—William Adams.

Eddie ground the bell in with the ball of his thumb, leaned on it with his whole weight. They must be hearing that, anyone would hear that, he wasn't giving the battery a minute to breathe.

Why didn't somebody answer? And then he looked down and saw that it didn't ring. The card that he or somebody before him had displaced lay where it had fallen. He could read it from where he was, *"Bell out of order."*

He gave a whimper like a small animal caught in a trap, flung himself against the thick glass inner door, began to pound on it with the heels of both hands. He visualized William Adams lying there in the dark, reaching out to the side of his bed, picking up a cigarette, striking a match—and him down below here, unable to get to him. Wait a minute, the janitor or superintendent! I should have rung his bell. That must be working

Just as he turned to do it, the street door opened behind him and a man came in, key in hand. One of the other tenants. But he was very drunk and very loquacious, and he dropped the key once before fitting it into the lock and twice more after he'd already had it in.

Eddie gave him a maddened push that sent him sprawling back, jammed the key in with force

enough to break it, opened the door with a sweep, and went hurtling up the inside stairs. The drunk's indignant remonstrances pursued him into the elevator.

Eddie was soon pummeling Adams' door far above with both fists and one knee.

"Let me in!" he called. "Let me in, can't you hear! For God's sake, open this door!"

A chain clashed faintly, the door edged narrowly open, and William Adam's nose showed, two frightened eyes alongside of it. At least they were living eyes! Eddie nearly folded up with relief for a minute, he had to open his mouth to let all the air out before he could say a word.

The man inside spoke first. "Get away from here, what is this, a hold-up?" William Adams rapped out sharply. "I'm warning you I've got a gun. Who are you anyway, what do you want?

"On the street just now—you remember?" Eddie panted, "I gave you a couple of cigarettes! I came to tell you—not to smoke 'em—not to touch 'em—you better let me have 'em back!"

"What're you driving at anyway?" said Adams suspicously.

"I found out something about 'em—never mind, give 'em back, I tell you!" His voice became high-pitched, hysterical. "For God's sake, open up. Can't you see I'm alone? This isn't a stick-up! Hand me those cigarettes back."

Adams said, "I'm going to telephone the police and have 'em come around and get you."

"There's something the matter with the cigarettes," Eddie shouted. He brushed a hand before his eyes trying to think clearly; mustn't tell him the whole story. "They were given to me by a doctor. Something got on 'em, one of 'em anyway—it'll kill you if you smoke it. He warned me and I come chasing all the way back to find you."

A woman inside gave a cry of fright. The chain clanged loose and Adams flung the door open. He put his hand to his throat. "I—I—"

"No, you're all right. If you'd smoked the poisoned one it wouldn't take this long to happen," Eddie said impatiently, brushing by him. "Where's the other cigarette?"

Adams pointed limply toward a bedroom door behind him. His wife was just inside it in a robe, trying to make up her mind whether to scream or faint.

Eddie Dean reached in back of her, snapped on the light. Next to the bed, just as he'd visualized it in his headlong rush over, was a stand, on the stand a tray, on the tray a pinched-out cigarette butt lying on a brown little bed of ashes. He picked it up, split it open with his thumbnail. Nothing but brown tobacco fell out.

"I told you you were all right.

You smoked the good one—but you don't know how lucky you are!" Eddie held out his hand impatiently. "Where's the second one? Hurry up, let me have it! Don't leave it lying around loose!"

Adams hadn't quite gotten over the shock yet, he kept running his hand through his tangled hair as if he was trying to think.

"Mildred," he said to his wife in a scared voice, "you were here when I came in, you must have seen me—what'd I do with it?"

This time she did scream, then choked it off with both hands. "You gave it to Fred! I saw you! Don't you remember, Bill, they were just leaving when you came in. He said he didn't have any either. You said something about sharing the wealth, and I remember you handed one to him at the door."

"Then he got the poisoned one," cried Eddie. He clutched Adams by the shoulder and tried to shake some presence of mind into him. "Tell me where he lives. Maybe I can still head him off!"

"It's too late," Adams said. "They live in Northbury. He'd smoke it in the car—he told me he wanted it for that, now that I think of it!"

Mildred Adams exclaimed: "The telephone!" and darted over to it, began to dial.

"It can't be too late, cried Eddie. "Where does he live?"

"Forty-seven Palmer Road," Adams sputtered, "that's in Northbury."

His wife said, "They don't answer; that means they haven't gotten in yet. Maybe you can still catch up with them on Northbury Road—it's only an old car."

Eddie Dean nearly turned her completely around getting out of the apartment. "Keep phoning, his life depends on it!" he said over his shoulder.

EDDIE DEAN was nearly run over by a taxi passing the door. Another good break, like with Bill Adams. "Forty-seven Palmer Road," he shourted as he stumbled in. "And don't slow up until you see an old second-hand car heading the same way we are! Stay on Northbury Road."

He sat back for awhile and coughed until he thought his lungs would burst. Too much exertion. The spasm wore itself out and he edged forward, watching the road ahead across the driver's shoulder.

It occurred to him he didn't even know the guy's name, had forgotten to ask them—just 'Fred,' that was all.

The houses had petered out; they were in open country already.

"That it?" said the driver suddenly. An old Ford was doing about thirty miles an hour in front of them, hugging the outside of the road.

"Get up next to them," said Eddie, "and I'll find out."

The taxi drew abreast, and swerved, its hubs nearly interlocking with those of the other car.

Eddie leaned his head out, shouted, "Fred? Your name Fred?"

The old car, two wheels off the concrete, began to wobble crazily. Its five occupants all straightened in alarm.

"No, I'm not Fred," the man at the wheel jabbered excitably. "What do you want?"

The taxi veered off again, shot ahead.

The suburb of Northbury showed up, in clumps of small brick homes.

"Palmer Road," the driver said, and turned down a side thoroughfare.

"Take that side and I'll take this!" Eddie ordered. "Forty-five, forty-seven, forty-nine—Wait a minute, you're passing it!"

The brakes squealed like stuck pigs. The house was back from the street and there wasn't a light showing. But in the split-second it took him to jump out, the porch light suddenly went on and outlined a Ford parked in the driveway in front of the entrance.

"I think I hear our telephone ringing," a woman's voice said. "Got your key?"

Eddie began to run across the lawn shouting: "Hold it! Hold it! Fred!"

They froze where they were standing, in a sort of tableau. The woman had her hand on the door knob. The man was standing beside the car with the door still open, holding his hands cupped to a cigarette; they showed up transparent, salmon-color against the match flame they shielded.

It went out while he was staring, but Eddie could see the haze already coming from his lips.

"Drop that cigarette!" he shouted. "Get that out of your mouth!" And almost colliding with the man, he tore the cigarette from his face, threw it smoldering on the grass over his shoulder.

"I just came from the Adamses' —been trying to warn you—that cigarette he gave you—something the matter with it—another half-minute and it would've been all up!" Eddie gasped it all out and stopped breathless.

Fred didn't wait to hear any more; he began to spit all over the place like an infuriated tomcat and brush his sleeve across his mouth.

The wife suddenly came running over to them. "That isn't the one Bill gave you, Fred," she said. "Don't you remember, you stopped off a few minutes ago and bought a pack at that diner just as we got into Northbury? The one Bill gave you fell in between the seats when you were trying to fish it out with one hand, don't you remember, and you said never mind, let it go—"

"That's right, I did, didn't I?" Fred said doubtfully and wiped his perspiring face, then "Wait, I bet-

ter make sure—" He took out a freshly-opened pack and examined it; only an edge of the foil had been torn off, only one hole showed in its tightly-pressed contents.

"Yeah," he said elatedly, "it came out of this new pack. Wow, what a close shave!"

"Then the bad cigarette is somewhere in your car," Eddie summed up, and reached for the front handle of the car.

"Oh, no," the wife answered simply, "I felt for it and found it while he was in the diner—I like to keep the car as tidy as possible —I threw it out of the car."

Eddie closed his eyes, reeled slightly; there didn't seem to be any end to this thing. It was like a game of tag gotten up by a playful devil. He pulled himself together again.

"That was only a few minutes ago, wasn't it? And right in front of the diner. You sure about that?" He was already starting away as he spoke.

"Yes. It's around the turn, on Northbury Road—you can't miss it. I even saw the cigarette. It landed on the sidewalk right in front of the steps going into the diner."

Eddie Dean was back in the taxi again, which had turned and was standing waiting.

"Back to the diner we passed!" he shouted to the driver.

The long chase had blunted some of the edge off his terror, but he was still worried and plenty scared. He was no longer at the pitch of frenzy in which he'd torn from Nick Miller's hotel to the Adams apartment. But he had to get that cigarette back to Big John Bossetti.

He vaulted out of the cab before it had even stopped and began to dash all over the sidewalk in front of the diner, bent double like a frog, chin nearly touching the ground. The windows of the diner threw big bright yellow

squares across the pavement, and if it was there he would have seen it. It was gone! It wasn't in front of the steps where she said she'd seen it land, and it wasn't under them, and it wasn't beyond in the gutter.

Eddie Dean lit matches borrowed from the taxi driver in places where the reflection wasn't strong enough. He straightened up, pulled open the front door, and stuck his head inside the diner.

"When was the last time you swept that walk outside?" he asked the counterman. There was no one else in the place.

"I never do that till six in the morning—just before the day man comes on," the man answered.

Eddie said, "Do you remember a guy in a second-hand Ford stopping in for a pack of cigarettes about ten or fifteen minutes ago?"

"Sure."

"Anyone been in or out of here since?"

"There was a big guy in here at the time," said the counterman, "nursing a cup of coffee. He left just before you showed up."

"I got to find him!" said Eddie. "Which way did he go?"

"Got me," the counterman said.

Eddie was back alongside the taxi driver again. "See anyone up or down the street?" he asked.

"What am I, an eagle?" the cabbie asked wearily, tired of all the frantic excitement by now. "Do we ever get finished?"

Eddie got in the taxi and stuck his head out of the window. "Drive slow, for a block or two, we may pick him up—if not we'll have to beat it back the other way!"

They went a couple of blocks, then Eddie gave up.

"All right, turn. He couldn't have come this far. The guy said he left just before I showed up."

The driver made a U-turn, muttering audibly. As they swept up toward the diner again a slow-moving figure came in sight around the corner of it, pausing to peer cautiously in at the windows.

Eddie Dean pointed. "That's him now, as big as life!" He must have been hiding in back of the diner the whole time we were here!"

Eddie jumped out of the slow-moving taxi in a gallop. The impetus of the moving car carried him across the sidewalk, face to face with the big man, who towered above him. The latter whirled, crouched a little; his first impulse was evidently to run, but Eddie had him crowded too close to the side of the diner.

"You picked up a cigarette when you came out just now—let's have it," Eddie said briefly.

"Who did?" said the big fellow surlily. "What you talking about?"

"I can see it sticking out of your shirt-pocket right now. I'm telling you to come across with it."

The big man put a finger on it possessively. "You're not going to get this," he said. "An old man with a big black mustache just gave this to me." He started to edge away from Eddie sidewise, his back to the diner.

The counterman had come to the door, stood looking out; the driver was watching from the wheel of his taxi; neither one of them made a move to help him. Eddie fumbled for the change from the ten-dollar-bill.

"I'll buy you a whole new pack, inside there, if you let me have that one—" He turned to the counterman. "Go in and get him a pack, any kind he says—"

Eddie stripped off a dollar bill, held it out toward the big man, gingerly ready to jump back at the first hostile move. Two fingers of the big man's free hand flexed tentatively back and forth close up against his jeans. Suddenly, with a snakelike quickness, the whole hand had darted out and back again. The dollar was gone, and he was scuttling around the corner of the diner. But he had dropped the cigarette at Eddie's feet.

TOMMY MITCHELL came to the door draped in a crimson robe and an ugly look on his face.

"So you got here at last?" he growled through the cigarette that vibrated with his breath. "It's about time!" He ushered the silent Eddie in by jerking his head backwards.

Mitchell closed the door, swung at Eddie with one fist, and then went on toward the door that led to Big John's sleeping quarters.

Eddie avoided the blow by rearing back, then stood there, his face chalk white.

"You haven't told him yet, have you, Tommy?" he asked. "You said you wouldn't—honest, I couldn't help it. I didn't do it deliberately!"

Tommy put a hand to the doorknob. "Have you got it?" he said.

Eddie nodded, raised his own hand to his inner pocket.

"Just wait'll you hear what he says when I tell him."

"Wait, Tommy, don't! Give me a break!" Eddie gasped. All his original terror of John Bossetti and what Big John could do to him had come back in full force as he had entered the place.

Tommy turned the knob, pushed the door open, and stepped into the dark room. He reached out to one side, snapped on the light, and then partly closed the door after him.

A moment later Big John's voice boomed out angrily: "What the hell is this? What's the idea!" Then Tommy, saying something in an undertone, telling him about it. Then Big John again, "Well, where is he? Did he come back with it? Wait a minute—" and the sound of a bed creaking.

With that the tension that had gripped Eddie Dean suddenly snapped. His fear became fluid instead of static, released him from the spot he was standing on. He whipped the carefully guarded cigarette out of his pocket, flung it wildly out before him, turned and fled, nearly stumbling all over himself in his hurry to get out of the place.

The cigarette described an arc, fell athwart the handful left in the tin box that Tommy had been smoking all night long. When Tommy came back, followed by Big John, the room was empty.

John Bossetti slammed the door angrily.

"Lammed!" Tommy said. "I

mighta figured he'd do that, the minute I turned my back. Probably didn't even have it with him! If I had my pants on I'd go after him—!"

Mitchell pounded on the cigarette he was smoking, took a fresh one from the box, and lit it, his fingers shaking a little.

Big John was pacing angrily back and forth; he appeared less put out about Eddie Dean's disappearance than about the miscarriage of his plans.

"A great night's work!" he seethed. He turned, went back into the bedroom, came out again. "Haven't even got a cigar left in the house, I was in such a hurry to pass 'em all out at the club and set myself an alibi!"

Big John reached down to the tin and took one of the cigarettes, lit it with a fuming swoop of the arm.

"Yeah," agreed Tommy, puffing away morbidly. "Tonight was all alibi and no job!"

"I'll get Nick Miller yet," swore Big John. "I'll think up another way, but I'll get him. And this time I'll get Eddie Dean too—he knows too much now!"

"Aw, these elaborate schemes are none of 'em ever any good," said Tommy Mitchell. "Why don't you just send a bullet—" He stopped speaking abruptly.

An instant before Big John Bossetti had been sitting there on a level with his eyes, now he lay face down on the floor. The thing had happened as swiftly, as silently, as a 'break' in a jerky motion picture film.

An inch or two away the cigarette Big John had been puffing on just now was still lazily sending up smoke at one end. At the other, a grain or two of whitish substance had spilled from it in falling, showed up against the carpet.

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The Third Eye

It was a pattern for murder which made psycho-analytic techniques seem outmoded.

by BRYCE WALTON

DR. HOBART BAYNE, the Clinic's director, had a habit of appearing suddenly without warning like a tic of guilty conscience. Now, as the office door clicked shut, Dr. Bayne moved his hand arrogantly as if it held a baton.

"Don't get up, Maury, my boy," he said. "Finish your coffee." He was an intense greying man whose large presence dominated the office, making it seem to shrink to the suffocating dimension of an airless mousetrap.

Maury Melton, under the bigger man's scrutiny, became uneasily aware of the silence saturating the *Mental Health Clinic's Outpatient* building, a vague whisper of falling snow. It reminded him this was Friday afternoon when most of the other staff members had left early for a longer weekend. Many, he thought wistfully, were going to skii.

Then Dr. Bayne said it. "We've got to get rid of Webbly."

Too much hot coffee went down Maury's gulping throat.

"I've been reviewing Webbly's

file. Paranoid delusions, pathological jealousy, right?"

Maury said warily that that had been his tentative diagnosis.

"Well, you've had him a year," Bayne said. "And I quote from your report. 'Patient remains detached, unapproachable, inacessible.' "

Maury's sad, gentle eyes lit up with impassioned concern for his patient. 'Oh, Webbly talks constantly, but only to hide his real inner problems behind a Berlin Wall of words. He externalizes his own conflicts onto his wife, Lara, and what he imagines to be her endless adulteries and intrigues. So I haven't been able to get inside Webbly enough yet to find out much and—"

"But he still boasts about how he'll murder them."

Maury hesitated. "There is always repressed hostility."

'He's still going to murder his wife and all of her alleged lovers?"

"If he ever locates any of them."

"Is he capable of doing it?"

"Anyone may suddenly act out destructive inner conflicts. I don't make predictons about a patient I know so little about. At best it's largely guesswork."

"Then your answer is yes."

"I don't have enough data to say definately what—"

"But you had enough data to diagnose delusional jealousy."

"That was a tentative diagnosis," Maury said. "And I haven't been able to verify or affirm it. I still think his jealousy is delusional, though."

Melton went on to explain anxiously to Dr. Bayne why he considered Webbly's jealousy to be a pathological, purely imaginative product.

Webbly never managed to identify any of the alleged lovers. He heard whispers on the phone, in the dark, through walls, but never obtained incriminating proof, no addresses or phone numbers or names. He thought they must use secret codes to frustrate him. Several times in Maury's office, Webbly insisted that while Lara waited down in the car for him she was entertaining one of her ubiqquitous lovers.

But when Maury looked out of the window to check, Lara was always alone. Webbly, however, insisted he saw her lover disappearing around a corner or into a crowd. He also swore he could sense Lara's desires for other men just by looking at her. These were obvious symptoms of delusional jealousy.

Dr. Bayne smoothed an iron-grey wave above his left temple. "How does Webbly intend to dispose of lovers who exist only in his imagination?"

Maury's gentle smile was nearly gone, and he felt the tension rising. "Webbly suffers all the humiliation and rage of a genuine situation. If the worst happened, some sort of

explosion of repressed rage, then he could imagine anyone to be her lover. He might single out an innocent man on the street and imagine he was it."

"And murder him," Dr. Bayne said. He shivered. "Maury—we have to get Webby *off our books.*"

Maury felt as though he might be sick. "What do you mean?"

"This is a Community Health Center, Maury. We depend on the Community for money, for survival. The least bit of unsavory business here and the superstitious slobs will kill us. Right now we can't stand bad publicity. Dr. Reichstein and company will soon pay us a visitation. Reichstein is chairman of the Lewiston Trustees upon whom we depend completely for operating funds. And it's time for another inspection.

"Now we have to have that money. We're going to get it, Maury. But what happens if one of our patients advertises our therapeutic skill by running around competing for a place in history with Jack the Ripper? Let me underline the obvious. There will be no patients here at all, nor a Clinic. As for us—why we couldn't get permits to practice as witch doctors in the back country of Ubango."

Maury's body felt hard and just this side of trembling. "But it's extremely improbable that Webbly will do anything violent. He never has, and I know that any time now

he'll begin to open up and positive therapeutic work will go—"

"We can't take the risk, Maury."

"But this is weird," Maury said, flushing. "It's incredible." His voice was getting thick. "You're saying that patients are here not for what the Clinic can do for them, but for what they can do for the Clinic. That's a hell of an odd amendment to the Hippocratic oath. It won't do, Bayne. Webbly's a sick man and he put himself into my hands and he depends on me for help. I can't just boot him out, for God's sake."

"You have a reasonable alternative?"

"Cure him," Maury said.

"I'd rather see him cured too," Dr. Bayne said. "I'd even like to see some indications of improvement. Your own report says, after

a year, patient shows no new insights into his illness."

"Some of them stay in their shells longer than others," Maury said. "But Webbly's about to open up."

Dr. Bayne looked at the sooty snow melting and sliding down the window. Looked at it pensively as though for some sign. Finally he said condescendingly, "I can give you a little more time, Maury. But before Rechstein gets here there'll have to be plenty of positive data in the books on Webbly. I mean plenty of measurable data spelling out the unquestionable conclusion that Webbly is vastly improved, if not altogether cured. Specifically I don't want to see any hint in our files of a potential homicide."

"I'll do what I can," Maury said, but his eyes felt grimy with exhaustion.

"Do a great deal more than you've been doing is my advice," Dr. Bayne said. "You're too permissive with them. Use directive methods for a change. Be more authoritarian. Pry him open, Maury. Cut open the clam."

Maury tried to control himself. "You know my attitude about that. A patient must be allowed to go at his own pace. Coercive, directive Methods can be terribly dangerous—especially with a patient you know next to nothing about. It's like performing a surgical operation in the dark."

"Well, sometimes you have to take a big risk, Maury. What about hypnosis, drugs?"

"I've tried hypnosis," Maury said. "It's in the report. He doesn't trust anyone enough to be hypnotized. I've used pentathol and amythol. He only talks more and faster about Lara's escapades—never about himself."

"Well," Dr. Bayne said with studied emphasis, "show positive therapeutic results with Webbly and show them fast, or he'll have to be dropped."

Maury looked at his hands. Although the room was warm, they trembled a little. Of course it was unthinkable to let a sick man go. Therapy was usually their last hope. Dismissing them was a kind of final abandonment. They often never tried to come back to any kind of therapy and the results were usually tragic.

He looked straight up at Dr. Bayne and kept smiling. "I'll do something, don't worry. I'll find a way to open him up."

Dr. Bayne left and Maury sat alone again, looking at the window. Wheels, footsteps moved soundlessly in the snow as if the business of living continued secretly behind pale but impenetrable curtains. There was no sky or earth in the falling quiet, but only snow sifting and frosting window glass, chilling rooms, deadening and hushing the town.

Maury thought—there are so many discouragements in the neu-

rotic world of perverted logic. It's often hard to measure or see growth even when it's there. You often feel beat—hammered—more like a piece of wracked machinery than a man. But you have to be very human, very sensitive as a man to understand human trouble—the most ephemeral of flesh too often squeezed to send out passionate cries of love and hope to the needy. Mental illness, like many other kinds, was contagious.

Maybe you could spend so much of your life with other people's suffering that you could start catching the disease. When did your resistance begin to break down? Perhaps you could mesh yourself too long, too tightly with the tortured gears of others. Their scars seem to be all over me. That peculiar dimness of perception sometimes lately—as if a thousand illnesses and agonies were starting to move like shadows across the walls of the brain.

I need a vacation.

But *you* can't take a vacation, Maury. Appointments would have to be canceled, and many neurotics thought that a personal rejection and were hurt and some regressed and others drop treatment and never come back. You lose them. You can't let them down even a little, lest they drop all the way and never bounce back . . .

WEBBLY TWISTED restlessly on the couch. He lit another cigarette. He chain-smoked and already the office was a choking smog of fumes.

"So I lay in the dark until Lara thought I was asleep. Then I lifted the phone and heard her talking to him on the extension phone in the patio. Sure, I felt cruddy eavesdropping on my own wife, but I've got to find out who they are!"

Maury leaned back in his worn chair at the head of the couch. He no longer strained forward with concerned concentration, yearning for a clue, some sign of change. He hardly listened to Webbly's continuing, familiar, repetitive account of Lara's marathon of illicit love. Only continuing fantasies. No facts, nothing substantial with which to work out a solid theory and begin constructive therapy.

While time ran out so fast he could hear it go.

Lara, Lara—

Maury felt the tension in his stomach. You couldn't be sure of anything. Webbly never exposed anything. What if his delusions were based on justified suspicions? Dreams, delusions, lies could be helpful clues to the unconscious. But first you had to know what was supposed to be real.

Maury had listened to those intimate detailed descriptions of Lara's soirees so long he could hardly get them out of his mind, not even at nights after he was in bed. Webbly described her coquettish personality so vividly it was often hard not to believe, at least

in some of the embarrassingly exciting stuff.

If Lara did cheat occasionally, that would indicate a completely different approach to therapy, a different sort of conflict. After all, if the theatre really is on fire, there isn't much you can do but get the hell out and—

But he tried to get back to Webbly. He tried, but never could. Trying to touch his personality was like poking at a bowl of lemon jello. But he leaned forward, straining, trying to find some rapport, some intuitive meaningful tingle of his Third Ear.

But instead he caught a fragmentary vision of a nude woman.

Maury stared as if his eyes were stuck on thick clouds and rings of cigarette smoke that seemed to have transformed themselves into the seductive face and body of a most desirable female.

And then it was gone, of course, while Maury still thought oddly that it might almost have been a ghost of Lara.

Suddenly, Maury leaned forward again. He had never done such a thing before, but abruptly, sharply, with anger, he interrupted Webbly.

"Please be quiet a minute."

"Wha—what?"

"I said, please shut up and let me talk for a change."

Time running out . . . pry open the clam . . . it may be necessary in an emergency to use drastic measures . . . be coercive and directive . . . and maybe it's necessary finally, sometimes, even to play God . . .

Webbly seemed stunned.

"You never get around to identifying any of Lara's lovers, Al. If you can't find out who they are, then you don't have to take any action. You never have to change anything. You don't want to change the situation, Al, because you enjoy it. You must enjoy it because you never talk about anything else. She cheats, lies, humiliates you, and you say you hate it, but you never do anything to get rid of it. You must love it, Al."

"That's ridiculous. I just can't find out."

"It's easily obtainable information."

"I can't get it. I told you how I—"

It had suddenly occurred to Maury, and it surprised him at least as much as it did Webbly when he said, "Then you should hire a private detective."

Webly shot up to a sitting position, sweating and flushed. Pale and plump he seemed even more swollen with repressed anger as he jerked his glasses off to reveal round blue eyes the size of ping-pong balls.

"Private detective!" His expression was one of incredulity, then growing disgust. "It's a stupid idea, nauseating. Anyway, I can't afford to pay some peeping creep a hun-

dred bucks a day. I can't afford *any*thing since I've been putting out to you four times a week. You've already bled me dry!"

Maury smiled. "I won't charge you anything then, Al—if you hire a private detective. You keep saying you don't have any personal problems. That your only problem is Lara. All right, get legal proof of her adulteries and your problem is solved. No more migraines, no more ulcer or colitus or sleepless nights. You'll never need me again either."

Webbly shook his head slowly. "Hire a dirty spying sneak—never! I can hardly believe you would suggest such a thing. Anyway I already know what's she's doing. And I'll find out the truth and settle it all myself, don't worry."

"That's just what does worry me, Al. Now—sorry, but your time's up."

Webbly put on his topcoat as though for the first time he really wanted to get out of Maury's care. Maury ached to send him away with the old warming reassurance, but the benign permissive way hadn't opened the shell, and therapy could never consist only of solace and consolation.

"You want to hang on to the situation, whatever it is, Al. You don't want to prove or disprove it because you would have to be responsible for taking action. Degrading, humiliating as your life is

with Lara, you don't dare change it. Why? I don't know, but I can guess. Maybe you don't want to admit the real reason for a man being obsessed with sick jealousy—that he has such a low opinion of himself he can't imagine his wife not prefering other men. Or maybe as bad as your setup is, or as bad as you imagine it to be—it's better than any alternative for you.

"At least you get some feeling of meaning, importance out of it. Drama, conflict. You keep yourself going with feelings of rage, self-pity, endless sweet plans for vengeance. Without that maybe you're afraid there wouldn't be anything—just the ordinary dull

world and you putting in your time feeling inferior in it—lonely, empty, meaningless."

Maury stopped himself. He hated preaching, hated playing the leader without really knowing where he was going, and Webbly shouted something unintelligible and ran out and slammed the door, his anguished features dissolving behind the frosted pane as in the murky water of some neglected aquarium.

Maury moved as though to call him back, change something, correct an error. But instead he slumped down and closed his eyes and out from between squeezed lids the tears came darting like minnows.

The office darkened. Maury didn't move. He finally could almost hear her familiar whisper, although of course he had never heard it, only heard Webbly describe it once. "And I heard her whisper, husky, down deep in her throat, you know, almost choked up with desire I guess. She never talked to *me* that way. She whispered *'oh love, you still don't know how wise I can be.'* "

Tension had built up a long time. Time running out fast. Time running out for inconsiderate patients falling behind Dr. Bayne's be-cured-or-else schedule. Strain threatened to break inside him like snapping wires.

He fumbled the directory out of his desk, began flipping through the yellow pages. Dentists . . . derricks . . . desks . . . .

He hesitated once with misgiving, but then any direct positive active seemed a relief and he continued flipping. Why not? If Webbly wouldn't hire one, Maury would.

Only he didn't think of it as a private detective.

But as a Third Eye.

He'd thought of that genial old psychoanalyst, Theodor Reik's *Listening with the Third Ear*. He had used the term to describe certain desirable states of rapport that must exist between analyst and patient. A strange, voiceless intuition, Reik said, an interchange that is more impulse than words or actions. Tiny signals, faint stimuli that waver, slip past, often attain suggestive significance for the connection of unconscious processes.

Listening with the Third Ear is like being able to sense deeper hidden meaning by reading between the lines. Little peculiarities, scarcely noticed movements, intonations, glances that might otherwise have escaped conscious observation. The Third Ear can catch what other people do not say but only feel and think. One mind speaks to another beyond words and in silence. Must follow instincts, hunches, intuitions.

The therapist begins to know things without knowing he knows them. The voice that speaks to

him speaks low but he who listens with the Third Ear hears also what is expressed almost noiselessly, what is said *pianissimo*. Reik says, *you must hear with the Third Ear what is said between the lines, whispered between the words, even what is left completely unsaid.*

Maury had always been able to use that Third Ear with other patients. But not with Webbly. The deep intuitions never connected with Webbly.

But he could use a Third Eye.

THE FINN Detective Agency was a small cozy old office in an old but decent building. A neon-light across the way kept winking a sign that said, Tuxedos for Hire. Mr. Finn was a rather handsomely athletic young man with a lean thoughtful face, the attentive look of a born listener and some quality of ageless disillusion.

He leaned back in the chair with a ruler balanced between his fingertips and surveyed Maury over the top of it. There was a cynicism in his eyes that seemed to promise that if you intended to tell him something to surprise him you would be disappointed.

But Maury surprised him. Mr. Finn stared. "I should know better than to think there's never something new. But I sure figured I'd handled every kind of tail there is."

Maury shifted uneasily. "I must find out what's imaginery and what is real. I can't get information from Webbly directly. But I'm still quite sure that his wife is probably faithful to him."

Mr. Finn grinned cynically. "Could be. I just learned my lesson about thinking I've seen and heard everything. But if she's playing around, you want to know how much, with who, how often. Right? Okay, I'll find out in a hurry or break a leg, Dr. Melton."

"I'm a Ph.D. but not an MD," Maury said quickly. "What is called a lay analyst, a consulting psychologist."

Mr. Finn shrugged scribbled in a ledger. "Confidential check on Mrs. Albert Webbly, twelve hundred fifty-three Schuman Drive. Check or cash as retainer?"

"Check. Fifty all right?"

"Fine, Mr. Melton. How long you want her tailed? And how do you want the report, verbal, written?"

"Depends on what you find and how soon. When you find out anything please phone me, keep me informed. This is my apartment number, this is my office phone. I'll be home all weekend for calls. At the office Monday, weekdays until around eight, then home. According to Webbly she never misses a weekend so you ought to know something by Monday."

"How thorough do you want it? We can tap her phone, bug car and bedroom."

Maury's eyes wavered. "Just so you get the information."

"I bill you personally, or the clinic?"

"Me—er—never mind. Just tell me over the phone and I'll send you a check."

"Anyway you want it, Mr. Melton."

Maury managed to smile, but he vaguely construed this "anyway you want it" as an oblique warning, as if the detective knew something unpleasant, or might be accusing him.

"We tap and bug, that'll mean putting out dough for another man."

"All right," Maury said irritably. "I want to know the places she goes, everyone she sees, what she says and does day and night. And you probably can use this."

He had remembered the photograph of Lara he'd been carrying in his wallet. Webbly had shone it to him then gone off and left it lying on the couch. Maury had kept forgetting to return it. He pushed it quickly across the desk to Mr. Finn without looking at it, together with the check for the retainer.

Mr. Finn smacked his lips. "I could tail that without any trouble even in Penn Station. All I'd need do would be follow the eyes." He grinned appreciatively. "If Webbly wasn't jealous of that he'd have to be crazy, or dead."

Maury didn't say anything.

"You want me to start tonight it'll have to count as a full day."

"Start now. Report to me as soon as you find out anything."

Mr. Finn's grin seemed a bit sarcastic. "Anyway you want it, Doc—Mr. Melton.

A big blast of wind waited for him at the corner where he caught the bus. He turned his coat collar up and hunched to wait in the snow. He was dressed warmly enough but the cold kept seeping under his skin. He felt chilled. Maybe the bugs have got to me, he thought, the annual flu bugs.

And the snow fell through darkness in big gray chunks that didn't melt. They came whiter, thicker, whispering, covering over, rounding off obtrusions, making similar mounds of everything. It seemed to bury sound, too. Even traffic moved muffled, slow, dream-like in the night.

And the people silently moving about in a shadow swarm, bothered him too. They bobbed toward and past him, and despite the murky darkness and curtains of snow, they seemed etched and sharp and real in a way they had never been before. He seemed to feel their eyes on him, as if just today they were different in a disturbing way—perhaps more real, more threatening somehow.

Everyone of them seemed to be looking at him.

HE TURNED UP the gas-heater in his bachelor apartment, then got

an unopened fifth from the pantry in the kitchenette and opened it. He had himself a drink. Then he had himself another drink. In Maury's opinion, bourbon was one of the oldest and still the best of all tranquilizers.

He sipped it slowly as he lay immersed to the neck in a warm tub. He had carried the phone in and put it on the tile so he wouldn't miss its ring. When he went into the small living room, lay on the couch with three blankets over him he had the phone right there beside him on the rug.

It didn't ring.

He suffered repeated attacks of chill and cold sweats. He seemed to be running a slight temperature, and certainly there was an increasing feverish anxiety as he waited for Mr. Finn's call. He drank fruit juice a few times but otherwise he felt too weak to move out of bed much. He began to wonder if he would be able to go into the Clinic Monday and that uncertainty brought on another cold sweat.

The anxiety stretched insufferably taut late sometime Saturday night, so he called Mr. Finn but got an answering service. Please leave name phone number and any necessary message for Mr. Finn. He did. His message was, *Call me.*

Sometime during the night the phone rang and he grabbed up the receiver. It was the same girl's voice from the answering service. "Yes, Mr. Melton—Mr. Finn says to hang on, that he's got a complete report coming up. He has to check on something—a tape recording, I believe."

"Did he say when he would call me?"

"No, Mr. Melton."

Sometime later, maybe it was Sunday morning, he called the Clinic and said that he might not be in Monday because he had been stricken with a rather severe attack of flu. A list of his patients with phone numbers, addresses, appointment days and hours was on his desk, under the blotter. Some appointments could be canceled. Other patients were too emotionally dependant and would have to be transfered to Dr. Horowitz; those patients were marked with a star.

"All right Mr. Melton. Dr. Horowitz will be informed as soon as possible."

Sometime Monday morning, perhaps 3 a.m., the phone shrilled out in the warm darkness and Maury snatched up the receiver. It felt like melting ice in his hot hands.

"It's already wrapped up as far as I'm concerned," Mr. Finn said casually. "You were right about Webbly. It's all in his head. We put a bug in the bedroom and tapped her phone and bugged the car. We taped just about everything all weekend. Never let her out of sight or sound since you left my

office Friday night. Now let me say with positive conviction and without any doubt whatever that Lara is clean—one hundred percent faithful to Mr. Webbly, okay?

"She shows no sign of ever having been any other way, and a quick check of her past verifies this. We followed her everywhere, shopping, movies, supermarket sunbathing—she never looked at a guy, showed no interest whatever.

"Now here's the clencher—all night Saturday and Sunday—or most of the night—the Webbly's argued their heads off. Webbly kept accusing her of being out with guys this Saturday and Sunday. That's right, we've got it all on tape. He's accusing her of all kinds of sizzling shenanigans. But we were with her constantly and I can assure you that Webbly was imagining it. She never saw or spoke with anyone. So that ought to do it, Mr. Melton."

Maury felt a drop of sweat run down his face. It loosened a nervous flush down his back that tickled painfully. "Thank you, Mr. Finn. You might as well stay on it another day or two, just to make absolutely sure."

"It's your money, Mr. Melton."

Maury found the bottle in the darkness and nervously poured another drink. Later sometime—he wasn't sure if it were a dream or not, but it was bad—something seemed to crouch in his mind that he couldn't escape even when he slept. A thing sat on his shoulder whispering red doubts and fears. Things crawled up through the trap door of his brain, mindless little incubi with no bodies or faces that scuttled inside his head squeaking in furry voices of doubt and chill horror . . .

He grabbed up the phone. But it didn't sound like Mr. Finn. It was near hysteria and hardly sounded like Dr. Bayne either but it was Dr. Bayne.

"Well, he did it, he did it!" Dr. Bayne kept saying.

"What?"

"Police just came in here because he was our patient. Hell, everybody will know that—*after* he did it."

"Who?"

"Webbly! Webbly! After he did it he went upstairs and shot himself. They found him with the revolver barrel still in his mouth and downstairs in the living room—you listening, Maury?—they found Lara and her lover."

"No lover," Maury whispered. "No lover. All delusion—"

"Both dead, Maury. He put three bullets in one, two in the other, and—oh hell what does that matter now?"

"No lover," Maury whispered. "Delusional—"

"He looked damned real to the police lying there with three bullets in his head," Dr. Bayne said. "Some guy name of Finn."

A LETTER from ED NOON by MICHAEL AVALLONE

Sometimes an editor's desk . . . can be tuned to murder-report wavelength . . .

Old Bridge, New Jersey
31 July 1964

Dear Leo,

You're probably surprised to hear from me, what with Mike Avallone usually taking care of all my paperwork. But Avo is somewhere in the South of France as of this writing tanning that pale New York skin of his and something's come up that I feel you and Brett Halliday ought to know about. The whole business threw me for a loop-the-loop and between me, you and the mailbox even Mike would probably dismiss it as sheer fantasy. But since you're publishing *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine* and you publish all of Shayne's cases for Brett Halliday, it concerns you both very much.

You see—what happened out here in Old Bridge is all about *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine.* So hang on and here goes. I'll tell you the whole thing from the start.

Maybe you didn't hear it through the grapevine but three months ago I moved into a split level off Route 516 as part of a special assignment for the Morgan Chemical Company. They opened a new plant out here, hired 1000 men, moved in about an equal number of families from the home base in Pennsylvania and retained

me as a Security Chief. I wanted a vacation from the Manhattan jungle, so I closed shop on West 46th and went back to nature. Take my word for it—it was a tonic. Fresh air without fumes, long walks without bumping into people ten to a block and all the solitude you could ask or hope for.

My work was a snap. I just checked out personnel, dictated reports to a beautiful blonde secretary and then had the rest of the day to myself. At four fifty a week, I had it made. I fished, golfed, relaxed and had a ball, generally.

Anyhow, that was before I ran into Mr. Walter Snipely.

Snipely is a retired insurance man who lives next door in a Cape Cod. Our houses are detached but I'd only have to walk about fifteen feet to bum a cup of sugar or a cigarette.

Well, nobody works at being good neighbors in Old Bridge, keeping pretty much to themselves so I didn't see much of Snipely the first month.

Then one day it happened. I was out in the back yard trying to work up enough ambition to mow the lawn when Snipely comes into his own backyard, slamming a screen door loud enough to wake the dead. In this case, me, your thrown-for-a-loop correspondent, who is sunning his lazy carcass in a hammock of sorts.

I said hello, liking his looks right off. He was tall, broad in the shoulder, and straight as a totem pole. In spite of hair grayer than Stengel's and a face that showed enough wrinkles to accommodate three Indian chiefs.

He said hello right back and waved a magazine at me.

Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine.

Naturally, that tickled me. I figured the old bird had to be a mystery buff, or he wouldn't be giving Shayne all that free publicity.

"Like whodunits?" I asked him, after we introduced each other.

"Don't read anything else," he said.

Why not? Or how come? I forget just how I asked him that particular question.

Well, he said—mysteries solve everything. No loose strings. As good as a proper insurance policy. (That was when I found out about him being an insurance man.) Everybody gets what's coming to them in the end. And then he throws in the topper. You want to know something? I have every Mike Shayne novel ever published. Hard cover and paperbacks. And each and every issue of *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine ever published in the whole world.* I'm quoting his exact words.

I have to admit I was impressed by that time. People with hobbies who pursue them with such single-minded dedication always impress me. The windup was, he invited me in to see his collection. And

bingo—he was telling the truth. Some fifty hardcover books, all the magazines since 1956 and a paperback version of each of the hardcover books. It filled an entire bookcase of his den. There wasn't any other kind of reading matter in sight.

Well, we were really buddy-buddy by then and I found out he was a nice old guy with three grown sons in the Pentagon somewhere and maybe the loneliest guy in town. When he found out I was a private operator, he dug up a bottle of Old Granddad and we killed the rest of the day swapping memories.

There's no more to tell you about Snipely except that two days later, he was dead. Crowned with a spade handle in the utility room of his home. I didn't find out about it until an Old Bridge policeman in blue uniform was banging on my door the next day wanting to know if I'd heard anything. I hadn't.

Snipely's killer had been as silent as the rat he was.

I checked the utility room with the policeman's okay once he saw my PI card and Morgan Chemical papers. The spade handle had splintered in half from the force of its contact with the old man's skull.

The next big surprise was the bookcase. It was as empty as a politician's promise. Each and every one of the Brett Halliday works was gone. Nothing but smooth, bare walnut-stained shelving was left. I didn't mention that to the Old Bridge Police Squad. I don't know why.

Except that I wanted to catch this particular killer all by myself.

Well, they checked out the whole neighborhood. Next door, all the houses within a radius of forty acres, I'd say. And came up with nothing. I knew exactly that much about the residents. If I had to do it by the numbers I was dead.

The Snipely slaying was Topic A in Old Bridge but a good week passed and nobody had come up with so much as a clue. All I could think of was those missing *Mike Shayne* books and magazines. The three Pentagon sons couldn't do anything either.

And then it happened.

I pushed it along a little bit, I'll admit. I had placed an ad in *Trends, a c*ommunity newspaper about five days after Walter Snipely was killed—a real simple ad: ANYBODY INTERESTE D IN COPY OF MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, DECEMBER ISSUE, 1955, PLEASE PHONE E. NOON 264-6618.

You guessed it. I got an answer. I took the day off from Morgan Chemical and about three that afternoon, somebody phoned. An old, tired, squeaky voice asking to come see the issue. I gave the address, set the time for eight o'clock that night and went upstairs to clean my .45.

The answer to my ad rang the doorbell at eight sharp.

It was a tall, thin skeleton type that said its name with Timothy Halwayne, lived around the bend on Bryant Lane and was very much interested in seeing the mentioned Mike Shayne issue.

"Come in," I said.

"Where is the magazine?" he asked.

"In the den," I said.

He followed me in, walking with one hand in his right pocket. He wore a green twill shirt and pants like he was a day laborer of some kind. He looked to be the same age as Walter Snipely, give or take a winter.

Well, in the den, I walked to the bookcase, reached for a magazine the same size as the Shayne and then turned and showed him the .45 I'd dug out of my right-hand coat pocket. He forgot about the ice pick in his own pocket.

"Why did you kill old Walter?" I asked.

Timothy Halwayne shook his head sadly. "I had to," he said "He always beat me at chess, checkers, everything. We were two old fools together. Too much money, too much time. He was always flaunting that collection of Shaynes in my face. For years now. By God, the other night—

He was a funny, terrifying old nut by that time, so I called the Old Bridge coppers and we both waited for them to come.

"Where's the collection now?" I asked.

"What collection?" he said.

"The one you stole from this house when you killed Walter Snipely," I said.

I can't tell you the screwy look that came into those seventy-five-year-old eyes just then. He looked right through me and cackled: I burned them, damn you and him both. What did you think I'd do with them?

Well, Leo, there it is. I found another murderer in the damnedest place. Old Bridge, New Jersey. And for the damnedest reason. A complete collection of the works of Brett Halliday's Mike Shayne.

Maybe you and Brett will get a laugh out of the whole thing. The story will cripple Mike Avallone when he hears it.

I hope nobody is putting together a wholesale collection of the adventures of Ed Noon.

It might get them killed.

There's such a thing as pushing adulation too far.

Well, love to Cylvia, regards to Brett and my very best to you,

Ed Noon

P.S. What could you call a thing like this? THE CRAZY MIXED UP COLLECTOR?

As you well know, *there was no December 1955 issue of Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine.* Timothy Halwayne should have realized that since he had the whole kit and kaboodle in his possession.

3 BACK COPIES FOR ONLY $1

You May Have Missed These Three Mike Shayne Stories

If you've just discovered MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE you may not have read any of the previously published issues. And if you are a real dyed-in-the-wool Shayne fan—and who isn't?—you'll want to read them. We have a limited supply left of some of these back copies and they are yours—by filling out the conveniently printed coupon. Each issue also contains—besides a new Mike Shayne adventure—short stories, novelets and short novels by prominent writers in the mystery, crime and detective story field.

No. 1 . . . TEARS FOR A GENTLE OLD LADY by Brett Halliday (Aug. 1963)
If Mrs. Cranshaw had stepped right out of a Victorian painting she could hardly have looked more like a fragile ghost from the past. But a killer, Mike Shayne knew, could easily brush that aside.

No. 2 . . . THE POWER OF DEATH by Brett Halliday (Sept. 1963)
The dark, mist-shrouded London streets had witnessed an appalling act of violence—an American knifed to death. And oddly . . . it meant trouble for McBain of Scotland Yard—and Mike Shayne.

No. 3 . . . THE DANGEROUS SECRET by Brett Halliday (Oct. 1963)
It was a little hard for Mike Shayne to believe that an elderly, mild-mannered janitor could interest a ruthless killer. But the Miami redhead thought it unwise to take too much for granted.

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A NEW JOE RODRIQUEZ STORY

THE BIG KEY SUICIDES

by TOM H. MORIARTY

Nothing posed more of a challenge to rookie plainclothesman Rodriquez than a locked-room murder case. But there were moments when the evidence seemed too puzzling for sane belief.

JOE RODRIGUEZ, rookie plainclothesman, was home asleep in his four-room bachelor quarters in a crumbling Chavez Ravine apartment house, when LAPD's Hollywood Division woke him up with a phone call at 8:49 a.m. Jose Juan Rodriguez had been in dreamland less than an hour and the aroma of his breakfast steak was still in the room. He had just come off the night watch and in the normal course of events would not be reporting back to the squad room at De Longpre Avenue until evening.

A hefty text book, *Abnormal Psychology,* was still open on the arm of a chair by the phone, to remind the young detective that he had read only a handful of pages before the type began to blur and he had conked out.

"This is an emergency, Joe," said Lieutenant Bennett. "Everything's breaking and we're shorthanded. Wilshire Division has asked for some help. There's a Big Key job down Rossmore I want you to handle. I haven't got anybody free who knows how to use The Big Key."

"Coming on the double," said Rodriquez. The slim, young plainclothesman with the Spanish features really meant it. No personnel director could ever fault him for not being a tiger.

Joe Rodriguez had passed up a chance to go on to UCLA after junior college, in order to tackle the stiff trials of the Police Academy. He felt that his career of law enforcement was hitched to a lucky star when veteran Fred Bennett cased him at work several years ago as a pea green patrolman. Bennett had decided that here was a natural-born plainclothesman to stack up against the various nutball categories of crime peculiar to Hollywood Division's empire.

And with good reason, because Jose Juan Rodriguez just naturally fit many parts, ranging from aspiring actor, collegian, through bar fly, beatnik, musician on the shorts to new breed missile physicist, and most everything in between that the job might call for with an accent on youth.

Rodriguez checked off the instructions, quickly dressed in a fresh combo of slacks and sport coat, and headed his private-licensed car for the North Hollywood station on Tiara Street. The Big Key was presently stashed out in North Hollywood, after recent use by the vice squad on a private home bookie set-up in the San Fernando Valley.

The Big Key was a modern version of the medieval, war-siege battering ram. The device was about four feet long, fashioned of inch-thick steel with hand handles attached along its key-like bar. At the business end was an arc of even tougher annealed steel. A sudden, controlled jolt from The Big Key upon the lock mechanism of most any door shattered tumblers, bolts, casing, what-have-you.

In other words, The Big Key opened the door, however well locked, barred, or latched it might be. Its principal virtue was to open up doors of gambling establishments immediately—before evidence of illegal business could be hidden or disposed of. The Big Key also came in handy in entering rooms which were locked from the inside and offered no convenient windows or transoms for entry. LAPD officers joked a bit about the Key, but never about its results.

At North Hollywood station, Joe Rodriguez showed that he was in excellent physical shape by moving out alone to the parking lot with the approximate seventy-five pounds of The Big Key and lowering the same into the trunk compartment of his car.

At Vista del Sur apartments on Rossmore he was, however, happy to get the help of Patrolman Jack Hendricks in carrying the famous door-opener up a flight of steps

and into the lobby. Three men and a woman came forward to greet the detective—and all of them appeared vaguely disappointed at the young man's deceiving appearance.

This slim and debonair chap with the profile and hair of a male movie lead was not exactly their image of an officer of the law. The censuring eyes of the obvious spokesman for the group, a chunky and fortyish man named Lester Tappen, plainly said as much.

Tappen quickly reviewed his reasons for requesting Patrolman Hendricks to call for help. The man looked jittery to Rodriguez.

The Vista del Sur maintained a switchboard for daytime telephone calls and used an answering service to handle night calls, Tappen explained. Miss Irene West, a first-line private secretary employed by Hailsmann Associates, Inc., a well-known Los Angeles advertising agency, had placed a morning wake-up call for 7:00 a.m. with the answering service at 11:35 p.m. the previous night. The answering service repeatedly called in the morning and got no answer, then passed along the negative results to the day-time switchboard attendant.

When Irene West did not appear at the ad agency for a scheduled and important early morning meeting, the first concern for her welfare was shown by Frieda Ponson. Middle-aged Miss Ponson, Vice-President for Women at Hailsmann Associates, was the woman now present in the lobby. Rodriguez judged her as suffering rather badly from some kind of hypertension.

Tappen then related that Miss Ponson conferred with him and they decided to come down and check up, for Miss West had recently been seriously ill. The other men in the group had accompanied them: Office Manager Peter Clay, the firm's sixtyish director of financial and personal morale matters, and Jay Crisnant, a husky young Detail Room neophyte who drove the car.

THE FRONT DOOR of Irene West's ninth floor apartment, No. 923, would not open to the management's duplicate key, indicating that the safety catch had been set on the inside, in the manner of a hotel security lock against night thieves. The service door from Irene West's kitchenette, facing a porter's alley, was similarly locked on the inside, and would not respond to any of the management's keys.

"Why didn't you break the glass on the service door?" Rodriguez asked.

"No glass," said Patrolman Hendricks. "Not only that, but the door's hinges are on the inside, same as the front. We can't pull out any hinge bolts."

"This is a lanai apartment design," said Rodriguez. "Let's take a look from the lanai overhanging hers. Maybe I can get a rope ladder from the Fire Department and lower myself down."

"We never thought of that," said Tappen.

"I was trying to avoid the damage that's necessary when we use The Big Key."

Nonetheless, the lanai idea was of no use. Although Irene West evidently enjoyed the prestige of the Vista del Sur's address and hotel-like facilities, she was one important space removed from the de luxe lanai locations. She looked out at the neon plain of L.A. from a standard wall window instead of from a gardened overhanging deck.

Outside of the service door, which was the least expensive of the two possible entries to the apartment, Rodriguez and Hendricks took up The Big Key and made a dry-run of their synchronized movements, holding the ramming device by its welded grips. Then Rodriguez aimed for the brass door knob and gave the signal.

A smashing success followed. The door shuddered and gave up noisily, swinging wide open in a shower of wood splinters and metal lock parts.

Rodriguez led Hendricks, Tappen, Clay, and Miss Ponson into the apartment. Crisnant had remained in the lobby. The first thing that everyone noticed in the kitchenette was a rack of dirty dishes, a water-melted ice cube tray from the refrigerator, and an array of used highball glasses of various sizes and colors, and a near-empty quart bottle of gin next to a bottle of lime juice.

The kitchenette led into a wall-less grouping of library, dining room, and sleeping alcove—what some architects like to call the principal living space. Only now it was the principal dying space, the dying space for two: a beautiful blonde young woman in gold-chased loafer Capris and a thirty-ish man of precisely-groomed distinction, including an orange button-down shirt and tie of avocado green color.

The living paused in silent inspection of the dead.

"It's Austin Graham," Peter Clay said in a voice of disbelief. The orderly figure of Graham reclined on a leather couch in an imitation of motionless day-dreaming.

Meanwhile, Lester Tappen gave support to grey-faced Frieda Ponson, who drooped to a chair as if she was about to faint.

"Nobody move," Rodriguez ordered. He stared into the dilated eyes of the supine Austin Graham, took up the man's left hand and cracked his knuckles down powerfully on a coffee table, getting no reaction.

He studied the full-figured beauty of Irene West, now awk-

wardly back-flopped on the chaise lounge, and similarly whacked her knuckles on hard wood, without reaction.

"Dead," said the detective. "Now I'll ask you to wait in the kitchen, but don't disturb a thing. If you do, you'll only leave your fingerprints scattered about and that might not be so good."

"If you don't mind, officer," said Tappen, "I don't think Miss Ponson should wait here. I'll take her back to the officer. Mr. Clay can give you any information you need."

Rodriguez welcomed the suggestion. There was much to fix in his mind about this luxurious room, much more than the fallen cocktail glasses on the wall-to-wall carpeting. He saw Peter Clay sag down on a kitchen chair and look hungrily at the bottle of gin.

"I know you'd like a drink, under the circumstances," said Joe, "but I'll have to ask you to hold your fire."

The bathroom offered more disorder. Towels, bath mats, and a dishevelled army of cosmetic jars, bottles, and vials exhibited the low calibre of Irene West's housekeeping. But the thing that caught the young detective's eye was a crashed bottle on the floor—an oversize bottle of prescription barbituates. Only two tablets remained in the wreckage.

Thus, the earmarks of an unrehearsed, impulsive double suicide

were throughout the place. Heavy drinking, disarray, doors locked and barred, and the remains of what looked like massive doses of the kind of barbituates that had to be signed for. Any number of mixed-up people had taken this messy route before them.

A *rehearsed* double suicide was something else again, Rodriguez had been taught by first-hand observation. There you found well-written farewell notes, good housekeeping and not much booze.

"It looks like a lovers blackout —an impulsive double suicide," Rodriguez reported on the phone to Lieutenant Bennett. "Motives unknown, but probably not money. The man has three one hundred-dollar bills in his wallet—oddly in his pants. He doesn't look like the type who'd carry a wallet in his hip pocket."

"No goodbye-we're-sorry notes?"

"Not a line. It may be the Coro-

ner can close this case if he gets the correct stomach match-ups. I'm bringing in the pills and—"

Bennett interrupted his protege, saying, "You're positive there was no way to stage the old locked-door murder on us?"

"I'll check it again, wall to wall. It's a modernistic joint with only one window and the air-conditioning vents are too small for anybody but a thirty-inch man."

"Okay, Joe. Downtown will send Photo Joe and The Fuller Brush Man. I'll give the reporters a 'believed to be suicide' preliminary release. So how about you taking this man Clay back to his office and get what you can on the girl and Austin Graham.

"Graham sounds like an important corpse to me. I know of the Hailsmann company. Arthur Hailsmann has been around L.A. a long time and travels in Police Commission club circles. Let's work up a Class A document on this one. You're in charge, Joe."

"No kidding? I hadn't heard of a shortage in Detective Sergeants this week. Thanks."

"You're in charge, Joe, because people in charge get used to working without sleep. I'm running a test to see if you qualify."

II

PATROLMAN Jack Hendricks took Peter Clay's warmed seat in the kitchenette and the detective and ad agency man departed for the Hailsmann offices.

"How long had Miss West been with you people?" Joe Rodriguez asked on the short ride to Wilshire Boulevard and the Ardmore Ten Building.

"As secretaries go, she was a senior girl," Peter Clay said. "She was twenty-seven years old, but had come to us as a file clerk out of high school."

"The Vista del Sur is a high-toned place for a secretary. How could she swing it? You people must pass out fat checks to your help."

"She probably had some other source of income. Yes, she would have to, to live in a two-fifty apartment like that place. But you must remember, she was a careerist, not just out to hook a husband like most of them. Let's say she was creating a background for herself. Perhaps she saw herself as Miss Ponson's successor in time."

By the time they reached the Ardmore Ten Building and drove into the underground garage, Rodriguez did not feel as young, callow, and graciously respectful as when he had been yanked out of the blankets two hours ago. The fact of being placed in charge of a case had reacted on his soul, to bring the first harp-string twangs of emerging maturity. Professional maturity, that is.

It had been nice being a rookie, everybody's friend, but it was

much better to think that now he was taking a sergeant's responsibilities. He decided that the place to get the background information desired by his boss was the office of the Chairman of the Board, Mr. Arthur Hoyt Hailsmann himself, and not from Lester Tappen or Frieda Ponson.

His progress along this line was temporarily blocked, however, by the cornflower blue eyes and golden-glinting tan of a perky receptionist in a room that resembled the play den of a Roman bath. Hailsmann Associates, Inc. occupied the entire tenth floor of the building. The official gateway to genius-land gave visitors an opportunity to examine framed examples of current Hailsmann rather flamboyant commercial masterpieces.

The detective dallied a few minutes inspecting art work dedicated to selling gasoline and oil, citrus products, swim suits, cosmetics, rent cars, canned tamales, banking services, airline seats, and the prestige of a hotel chain, among other commodities and vanities.

"I'm not a client," Jose Rodriguez assured the mystified charmer. "I'm a cop. So put that call through right now and save everybody's time."

"But you have no appointment," the girl expressed her ruffled feelings.

"Neither did Irene West or Austin Graham have an appointment with the Coroner."

As he walked down through the maze of departments enroute to Mr. Hailsmann's corner office he marvelled at the separate kingdom of this big organization, and its refinement and self-sufficiency. These people seemed to live apart, revolving on an axis unrelated to the slam-bang world outside.

Arthur Hoyt Hailsmann suavely provided Rodriguez with a few enlightening answers, after stating the expected phrases of shock and sorrow. Bennett had said that Mr. Hailsmann moved in Police Commission circles and the young clothesman now learned what that meant: the kind of grey hair that looks distinguished, the weathered sheen of health, assurance in merry eyes, hand-tailored clothes even to the French-cuffed shirt.

"Austin Graham married his secretary," the head man said," and Mrs. Graham personally picked her successor, Irene West. Graham may have given the idea to some, but he was not a woman chaser. Minna and I, that is, my wife and I, were thinking that the Graham marriage had set a record for smoothness. Susan Graham was bowling them over on the Philharmonic Committee club activities, acting like she had come straight out of the Social Register instead of off our payroll."

Jose Rodriguez began to feel

uncomfortable at this somewhat meaningless turn of conversation. Here he was in charge of a case and he was wasting time listening to an assured old boy make social commentaries. He listened awhile longer and then set out to pin his man down.

"When people commit suicide together," Rodriguez said, "They usually have meant a lot to each other until they came to a sudden dead end—some block, some obstacle to their continued happiness." He was borrowing freely from his psychology book now. "They can't see any reason for going on in the face of hopeless difficulties. They find it easy to justify destroying themselves. Now, I can see where an idealistic, emotional girl, not married, might buy that. But not a man like Mr. Graham appeared to be.

"Are you completely sure about him, when you say he was not a chaser? Remember, the Bureau of Missing Persons is loaded with flyers on well-to-do runaways who've turned their faces away from family and friends. All kinds of people have a secret life."

Mr. Hailsmann sat up a little straighter and obviously took Joe Rodriguez more seriously after the speech.

"I see what you are after," he said. "Motivation. Well, I certainly know of no trouble or situation that would have moved Austin to say the hell with everything and take his life. As a matter of fact, the same thing goes for Miss Irene West. She was a pretty girl with much to look forward to. She would have gone higher in our company. I'm sorry, but I guess I can't help you."

"You can, sir," said Rodriguez," in regard to some specific details. For instance, I want to know for the record, the exact movements of both parties yesterday. I want to trace as well as we can the events leading up to the arrival of Mr. Graham and Miss West at the Vista del Sur."

"That will be easy," said Hailsmann. "Last night was our Bowling League night. Almost everybody goes. See Peter Clay on that."

"First, I wonder if you would fill me in on Mr. Graham's relative rank in your company?" Rodriguez had in mind relative vulnerability.

Mr. Hailsmann pulled a card from his desk. It showed the levels of the business pyramid from his own position at the peak on down.

Immediately below him was President and Executive Officer Orville Patch, age 51. "Orville's my quarterback," Hailsmann said. "He keeps everybody on his toes, from Detail Room to Department Heads."

Under Mr. Patch were three Senior Vice-Presidents: the late Austin Graham, age 32, in charge of Creative Services; Vincent

Mohlman, 41, in charge of Administrative Services; and Lester Tappen, 38, in charge of New Business.

On the next level were Frieda Ponson, 47, Vice-President in charge of Women's Activities; Office Manager Peter Clay, 60, Secretary of the corporation and director of financial and personal morale sections; and Varley Olds, 46, Art Director. The bottom level listed Account Executive-Vice Presidents Ron Byerley, 31; Fred Walsh, 32; James Gregorian, 34; Kenton Lee Silsley, 38; and Martin Quizzenberry, 39, Public Relations Director.

"Graham was on your first team, then," said Rodriguez.

"All of that," the executive replied. "I had marked out Graham for advancement when my time comes to retire. That's confidential, of course."

"This is also confidential, Mr. Hailsmann. Would you tell me how you would now rank your people as most qualified to move up if you decided to retire."

"If, for example, Orville Patch took over from me and left the Executive Officer job open? Why not tell you. No harm done and I believe in cooperating with the police. I would handicap them this way, and for various reasons which add up to their ability to keep a fifteen million dollar company going forward. Graham would have been my choice to

succeed Patch. Then, in order, Tappen, Mohlman, Gregorian, Silsley, Walsh, Frieda Ponson, Byerley, and Olds.

"Byerley is my son-in-law, so I purposely don't place him higher on the list although he's about as sharp a young man as we've got around here. I don't believe in nepotism. Olds is last because he's an artist primarily and has no conception of running a business organization."

"You didn't mention Mr. Clay or Mr. Quizzenberry."

"No Pete Clay's sixty, like I am,

and this is a young man's business. Clients drift away sometimes if they think they're getting old-fashioned stuff. Much as I like Pete—in fact, he started with me as a bookkeeper—Hailsmann Associates couldn't risk him in the driver's seat. As for Martin Quizzenberry, PR is a field I never associated with management skills."

JOE RODRIGUEZ cordially thanked his new friend and went to Peter Clay's office. In point of fact, he had a hard time finding Clay's office amid the complicated crosshatch of corridors, walls, and offices which had been created by compartmentalizing pre-fab steel sections, pillars, and doors. The effect was of separate principalities within the separate kingdom of the tenth floor, each area being of unequal size to accommodate its quota of workers.

Clay quickly produced three people, after learning the detective's wishes: Fred Walsh, Ron Byerley, and Varley Olds. Rodriguez quickly tagged each with looks-factor to remember. Walsh was Black Irish with a faint contempt in his eyes. Byerley had a Junior Chamber of Commerce alertness in a ready-to-smile face. Olds appeared carelessly, though richly, dressed on purpose, in the manner that some rich men choose to make themselves anonymous.

"Austin Graham drove Irene West to the alleys, over on Eighth Street," Varley Olds said. "The women have their league competition on the same night as the men. There was nothing odd about him doing that because all of us give each other a lift that way."

"About all that sticks out different to my way of thinking," said Byerley, "is that Austin rolled a lousy ball all evening. He guttered once and he's a one-forty bowler. That could be why he started hitting the alley bar before the evening was half over."

"About ten o'clock we finished," said Walsh, "and the three of us and Graham stopped at a nearby bar on Eighth and Normandie."

"Miss West went home by herself then?" said Rodriquez.

"Right."

"Anything happen at this bar?"

"Graham shifted into high gear on his favorite gimlets," said Walsh. "With him, that often meant quarrels and arguing. We tore at each other. Talked office politics for an hour. That's about all. The only thing it accomplished was to put Ron the spot, which is nothing new to him. I guess you know, Mr. Rodriguez, that Ron Byerley is Papa H.'s son-in-law."

Byerley said, with an infectious grin, "You're looking at the man who performed The Hat Trick and married the boss's daughter. But I don't happen to think that my father-in-law should retire and I

let Austin Graham know perfectly well how I felt."

The Art Director now came back into the conversation, saying with an older man's finality, "It boils down to this, Mr. Rodriguez. Graham had managed in his own patented way to get across to some people that he was the man best qualified to fill the vacuum when Orville Patch moves up."

"At fifty grand instead of two-bits," Walsh chimed in. "Personally, I never did see a purely creative man make a good exec."

Joe Rodriguez soon tired of the politics and cut the debate short. "What happened when you left the bar?" he said. "Did you take Mr. Graham home?"

"We did our Boy Scout deed," said Walsh. "We saw he shouldn't be driving a car by that time. We put him in a cab, paid the cabbie a five dollar bill and gave him the Graham address up on Beachwood in the Hollywood hills. I kept his car keys so he couldn't change his mind."

"Have you got the car now?"

"No. I turned over the keys to a Detail boy this morning to pick up the car in a parking lot on Eighth."

"What is the Detail fellow's name?"

"Crisnant, I think."

Rodriguez thought it odd that Fred Walsh did not know the young man's name for sure. The detective remembered Crisnant as a husky, tanned crew-cut type who looked a man, not a boy.

The information was meager, but it did take Graham up to roughly eleven o'clock last night. Once in the cab, Graham could have countermanded the order to the driver and headed for the Vista del Sur, ornery from gimlets and argument and perhaps looking with favor on the consolations of an attractive bowling buddy, Irene West.

III

THE YOUNG DETECTIVE returned to De Longpre in an indecisive state of mind. Suicide had its own peculiar set of motives, but none were showing up. He went into the squad room to compose his report. He had a portion of it on paper, ready for the stenographer, when Lieutenant Bennett summoned him on the intercom. Rodriguez hurried in to face the off-shore blue glaze of the veteran's eyes.

"You were betting on double suicide," Bennett stated flatly. "The Coroner vetoes the idea. The lab found no barbituric whatsoever in either stomach. No $CH_2(CO_1\ NH_1)_2CO$ as the man says here." He indicated the lab report. "Nor did he find the conventional Mickey Finn—chloride hydrate, orange and citric acid. What he did find was a killing wallop of hydrocyanic acid. Peach blossom

smell. Easily camouflaged in a mixed gin drink."

Joe Rodriquez looked blankly into the impassive face of his superior. His first case—and he had stubbed his toe on the diving board and belly-flopped into the water.

"That's why we use cautious releases, my friend," Bennett went on. "Don't feel bad about it. We've run into something bigger than we thought."

Rodriguez perked up again and said with his innate diplomacy, "I see why you had me dig for background. It didn't look like we needed it at the time."

The veteran smiled. Now he was enjoying his mentorship again. It was a healthy situation when you worked with a kid who appreciated what you tried to do for him.

"I've learned to distrust any thing with locked doors in it," Bennett said. "I can never forget that locked-door murder at the old Globe Studios. A stage carpenter built in a whole office wall during the night. Had us going nuts figuring out that one. So what did you find out about Graham?"

Rodriguez gave him the story and summed it up. "Half a dozen people over there can't," he said, "be too broken up over his death."

"I'll sit on this information," said Bennett. "But remember, it's your case and you're still calling the shots."

The path now led surely to a talk with Austin Graham's wife, Rodriguez decided.

"Mrs. Graham is my next move. I'll take it from there, from her suspicions."

Rodriguez said this bravely to the lieutenant, though in his mind he was not near as confident as he sounded. The many motives of murder now had to be probed, for nowhere in the apartment had there been evidence of hydrocyanic acid. Revenge, retaliation, financial gain, blind hate, abnormal ambition, prevention of public exposure, self justification, and on and on. Motives associated with the young and with the old, with the wise and the foolish—none was irrelevant now. He knew that he had got himself a whopper of a case the first time out.

Checking the morgue, the plainclothesmen learned the name of the mortuary to which the widow had entrusted her husband's funeral. He called Mrs. Graham's home, got no answer, and drove to the funeral parlors on Beverly Boulevard. There, as he expected, Mrs. Austin Graham was conferring on arrangements.

Rodriguez decided to risk telling her the true facts, under pledge of secrecy and because it seemed the kind thing to do. He decided this after noting her characterful face, which he judged had nothing of guile but everything of personal loss.

"I thought as much," she said simply. And then her mask of protection, the frozen emotions of ultimate shock, cracked wide apart and for some seconds she sobbed huskily.

"Thank you," she continued, when she had recovered her composure. "I never lost faith in Austin and now I never shall, ever. He was a creative personality, different from most men. Our marriage was a success, a joy."

The business of consoling grief-stricken women was no brand new thing to Jose Juan Rodriguez. He had served his apprenticeship in a large Mexican-American family in East Los Angeles, among people in whom the heart speaks unashamedly in time of sorrow. Because of this gift, some minutes later, sitting in her car out front, Joe Rodriguez was thus listening to a woman who suddenly wanted to talk and relieve her feelings, who wanted in every way to help him track down her husband's murderer.

"I know the inside of the Hailsmann angel cake," Mrs. Graham said, "and it's not as sweet as it looks. To begin with, Minna Hailsmann runs her husband. Austin would have been Executive Officer and President long before this and Orville Patch would be Chairman of the Board and Papa H. retired if Minna hadn't said no."

Why would she want to block out talent?"

"Because of a man named Ron Byerley. He's the son-in-law, you've probably learned by now. If Minna has her way—and she will, no doubt—nobody's going to become Executive Officer, nobody's going to be the Number One wheel except her very own son-in-law."

Rodriguez wondered at the savage attack. Was Mrs. Graham expressing her dead husband's views, or her own? Like many another person who left an organization, did she miss her old status and position as an insider, and was she unconsciously reverting to it?

"I heard different from Hailsman himself," he said, to further prod Mrs. Graham to reveal her secret thoughts.

"You will see what I mean when you learn the facts. Ron Byerley came to work in the Detail Room soon after I was promoted to be Austin's secretary. It's Hailsmann policy to start out the young talent in the Detail Room, incidentally, as a kind of probation period to see if they fit in. Ron was then married to a girl who worked for another ad agency, the Kilmayne people downtown. Her name was Juanita Alvarado, a Spanish name like yours, and she was a darn good artist on women's styles.

"Well, on one of the many er-

rands they give those Detail boys, Master Byerley found himself chauffeuring Debby Hailsmann, the daughter, to Balboa, where she keeps her sail boat. The next thing you know, Debby was head over heels gone for Ron and told her mother as much.

"A gentleman would have walked out of such a situation. But not Ron. He weighed his advantages and decided to get rid of Nita. Yes, in cold blood, and with out-and-out encouragement from Minna, Ron Byerley gave that pretty wife of his the gate. I remember it very well. His so-called leave of absence. That's when he took Nita to Mexico and they stayed around Ensenada for awhile. Then a Mexican divorce and Nita never did come back from Mexico.

"A girl full of talent and looks, born and raised in East Los Angeles, and there she was heartsick and ashamed and afraid to come back. That's the kind of man Mrs. Hailsmann wants to run the company, and she won't let her husband retire until she gets her way."

"I'd certainly classify this fellow Byerley as a first-class heel," said Rodriguez. "But he has a long time to wait, after all."

"I don't know about that," she said aggressively. "Orville Patch is going downhill fast. One of the last things Austin told me was about Patch's failing health. He's a widower, you know. His wife died unexpectedly about five years ago. Cancer. They had lived for each other and now he was alone. Believe me, I know how abruptly and shockingly alone. He turned himself into a work machine, an eighteen hours a day man."

"Mr. Hailsmann seems to like his performance."

"He should. Patch is two men. Austin expected him to collapse some night in his office and they'd find him in the morning. Vince Mohlman, Les Tappen, Pete Clay, all of them know this has been going on, but nobody stands up and warns Mr. Hailsmann about it. The old boy is off in wonderland making speeches at ad conventions and taking Orville for granted as the old reliable."

"I wondered why I didn't run across Mr. Patch at the agency. Hailsmann didn't call him in. He sent me to Clay instead."

"Orville Patch encourages anonymity. He thinks of himself as a Control Room and maybe he's right. Certainly the outfit is about the most efficient automated word factory I ever heard of. Long on production. Short on temperament. I can see why Hailsmann Associates get the big accounts."

IV

THE FACT OF Byerley marrying and ditching a pretty Mexican-American girl really got to Rodri-

guez. He stopped his car in a parking space on Seventh Street next to MacArthur Park, to think about that incident a bit. He knew the type of olive-skinned Mexican beauty that would attract a man; he knew the type very well. Some of his own sisters possessed the soft, liquid-eyed appeal.

They were as helpless as they were beautiful. Their innocence in a worldly sense was conditioned by convent schools and strict home supervision. The only saving grace was that it was often an effective shield against personal harm.

Thinking deeply of his own people, Jose Juan now reflexed to wondering if his East Los Angeles friends named Alvarado, which was a name as common as Smith or Jones elsewhere, might know which family claimed Juanita Byerley as their daughter.

He acted on the impulse and drove out to East Los Angeles and the old neighborhood. A used-car salesman friend of his on Atlantic Boulevard, who knew hundreds of Mexican-American families in the Los Angeles suburb, had a ready answer for him.

In a matter of minutes Joe Rodriguez was knocking on the door of a small commercial laundry in an alley street. He remembered the proprietor from his first probational weeks as a patrolman in the area.

"You get fired?" the old lady greeted him. She remembered too.

"No, I'm still a policeman, Senora Alvarado."

"You no cop. Where uniform?"

He had a tough time explaining, for there was no simple word for plainclothesman in the Spanish language. *Un detectivo de traje ordinario* was the closest that he could come to it. But he did get across to the old lady the purpose of his visit. With no warning she exploded wrathfully.

"Juanita, she's Alvarado *nada*. She's strippa-tease. She's brighta star."

Rodriguez scarcely understood at first. He had expected to get the girl's address in Mexico.

"But where is Nita? Where can I reach her?"

"Hollywood *del Norte,*" the lady replied. Rodriguez felt that he was getting warmer now. That had to mean North Hollywood, in the San Fernando Valley. "Strippa-tease. Brighta star. Lankershims."

The light grew brighter. Rodriguez well knew of the several bur-

lesque houses on Lankershim Boulevard in North Hollywood. He had worked one of them on loan to North Hollywood Division when LAPD was tracking down The Man in the Green Straw Hat, a likable nutball who stole a Rolls Royce limousine and managed to keep it under wraps for six days, but not for six nights.

"Gracias, Senora. Linda mia, mi corazon del corazones. Beso la mano."

The old lady smiled, knowing now that she was beautiful again, that she was his heart of hearts, and that he kissed her hand.

A strip-teaser. Rodriguez wanted to laugh out loud at the thought of it, but he doused his instinct, thinking still of the facts that Mrs. Graham had given him. Though previously ready to drop for lack of sleep and food, the young detective now persevered.

He drove off the Riverside Freeway at the Lankershim outlet and headed north up the boulevard around 7:30 p.m. For strippers, this was far too early an hour to perform. But Rodriguez hoped to case the place outside while he still had powers of concentration.

Between the freeway outlet and Victory Boulevard the riddle of Senora Alvarado's information resolved itself. On a canvas sign, flapping in the breeze in front of a remodelled garage building, was an intriguing picture of an athletic young woman with the words: BRYTA STAR, *the Heavenly Body; Performances Nightly starting 9:30 p.m.*

Rodriguez drove in to a nearby Chinese restaurant, intending to report by phone to Lieutenant Bennett and at the same time stow some hot Canton groceries against the non-stop 24-hour drain on the day's energy. His mistake in tactics was notable: he ordered the Crab Foo Young and the Chow Mein before telephoning. He was mentally tasting the fragrant concoctions when Fred Bennett came on the line.

"Where are you, Joe?" the lieutenant angrily said. "Orville Patch has shot himself. Go to the Ardmore Ten Building. The Big Key will be there waiting."

Leaving two dollars for nothing except pride, the detective ran out to the parking lot. There, he faced a new irritation: the problem of driving a private-license car real fast, over the Hollywood Freeway which bulged with the evening stream of cars headed for the Interchange.

Drivers, racing in the high speed lane, blew horns at him. One shook a fist. A lip reader would have held his ears in shock, watching driver reactions to Rodriguez's lane-changing and bumper-hugging pace. Nary a CHP pursuit car or bike hove into view to assist him before the Normandie outlet came up.

He sped over the hill grades and swished into the Ardmore Ten garage in a state of raw nerves, gnawing stomach pains, and a floaty weak feeling from lack of sleep. But these were only petty irritations compared to the prospect of again having to resort to The Big Key.

The steel battering ram was by tradition the vice squad's tool of work, not a creative detective's, his thoughts ran. Here he was in charge of the case, his first and only assignment with one hundred percent personal prestige attached, and The Big Key pops up again. He could hear the hearty laughs in the squad rooms all over town, over his seemingly favorite method of uncovering evidence. Rodriguez the Locksmith.

LESTER TAPPEN was waiting for the young detective when he got off the automaitc elevator at the tenth floor.

"We meet again," Tappen said, "and I guess you don't like the circumstances any better than I do."

Enroute through the maze of corridors and panelling, Tappen quickly filled in what had happened.

The agency had been near-deserted. The sound of a shot had brought Peter Clay, Varley Olds, and Tappen running in the general direction of the north side of the floor.

Orville Patch's office was lit up. They could see that because a crevice of light shone up from under the entrance door. But this door was locked and bolted on the inside. An odor of sulphur could be detected.

The only officer available in the neighborhood at that time was Patrolman Jack Hendricks. Hendricks reported back to Lieutenant Bennett that the office was a tight assembly of steel panels, floor to ceiling, with doors that locked only on the inside.

Rodriguez asked Tappen if there were any windows in Orville Patch's office. There were two, of the horizontal-opening type and of thick plate glass. They were sealed-type smog-proof windows, not designed for ventilation and frequent opening, but for emergency opening onto a fire escape grating that ringed every floor.

Rodriguez felt relieved when he heard this. Perhaps The Big Key would not have to be used to smash down one of the steel doors.

He located an entrance to the fire escape walkway, through a window in the vacated office of Mr. Hailsmann nearby. He next climbed out and made his way along the aerial walkway to a point outside the Patch office. The view was chilling. Rodriguez looked in upon a small thin man lurched half out of a chair, executive posture design, behind a king-

size blonde oak desk. Blood soaked the man's shirt from the neck down into his rumpled coat. A spray of blood dotted the corner of the desk.

It looked to Rodriguez as if the man could have committed suicide. The muzzle velocity of the bullet would have knocked him back and drooped him in the leaning position in the broad arms of the chair.

Over and above the realities of the ghastly picture, the apparent emaciation of Orville Patch registered in Rodriguez's mind. The words of Mrs. Graham were confirmed. The man had been burning the candle at both ends with a blow-torch in the middle.

He tried the windows. They were both locked—locked with the maddening simplicity of a lever-like steel catch in place. The catch was in full view; so near and yet so far. He dreaded the thought, but he knew that it would have to be The Big Key again, unless by chance the Ardmore Ten Building could summon a force of construction technicians and figure out how to remove a web of steel panels and take down a wall.

His view from outside now eliminated the idea of entering that way, for closer inspection showed the fitments and screws of the paneling all on the inside of the office, perhaps with the idea of making the outside trim looking.

If only a window were open, Rodriguez was thinking sadly—when a solution popped into his head. It would be a Big Key job, all right, but not on the doors. Instead, it would be one of these locked windows. He hurried back and called for Patrolman Hendricks to bring The Big Key and help him launch the boffo on the glass.

In less than five minutes, the young detective reached through a hole in the thick, jagged glass, wondering to himself how he had summoned up enough strength to assist Hendricks.

The lever went up; the window opened. Rodriguez went through and took the massive Key from Hendricks, lowering it inside the office.

An Army Forty-Five lay on the carpet at Patch's feet. Rodriguez did not touch it, but crawled under the dead man's arm and examined it carefully. The big automatic pistol had tumbled down to rest on its right face.

He looked again and at first he could not believe his eyes. His stomach went queasy at the sight. The safety catch on the left top of the magazine was snapped shut.

Someone other than Orville Patch had squeezed the trigger, then fixed the safety catch shut, perhaps by instinct for his own protection, knowing that the big heavy blasters are also sensitive to bumps, knocks, and careless handling. By no stretch of the imagi-

nation could a wounded Patch have closed it.

In a corner of the office, Rodriguez found the slug which had killed Patch. Tremendous muzzle velocity had pumped it through the man's throat and the death pellet had come out under the right shoulder, ricochetting and burying itself in the corner baseboard.

The two doors, nonetheless, remained the detective's enigma. Each door had been locked on the inside by moving a control tip of metal horizontally, in the manner of a hotel auxiliary latch which visibly augments the key-lock on the inside, and prevents opening from the outside by any key.

Again Rodriguez knew that he had run up against the most baffling of situations: the locked-door murder. This one qualified for the descriptive easily. There were no open windows, no large air vents, no ceiling or floor apertures.

As he unbolted the entrance door Rodriguez considered that at this very moment he might be opening up to someone who knew how the job had been managed. He decided to keep all of the information to himself and let the agency people assume that he regarded the tragedy as a suicide.

Mr. and Mrs. Hailsmann, Vincent Mohlman, and several unknown employees had joined the original group outside by the time Rodriguez swung open the door

and stood in the middle, blocking the view.

"You can take a look in," Rodriguez said, "but you better not if you have a weak stomach. Mr. Patch is dead at his desk and the pistol is on the floor under him. Don't enter, anybody. I'm bringing a detail to take the record pictures."

Arthur Hailsmann glanced swiftly inside, paled, and turned his head aside.

Vincent Mohlman did not choose to look inside. He seemed concerned mostly with comforting a lady who did not appear to need the attention, Mrs. Hailsmann. Rodriguez now saw her to be a

smartly-outfitted older woman with a strong chin and piercing green eyes.

Minna Hailsmann looked in, intently, before turning away.

"Poor Orville," she said. "He didn't know what he was doing to us."

How self-centered can you get, thought Joe at the woman's remark.

Rodriguez closed the door, stationed Hendricks to keep out the ghoulishly minded, and drove back to De Longpre.

V

THE LIEUTENANT was bawling out a Detective Sergeant unmercifully when Joe Rodriguez approached his boss's office. The rookie plainclothesman waited his turn for some heat.

Fred Bennett eventually looked up at the slim young man, and sarcastically said, "Another door blasted down, Rodriguez? You're giving us a fine reputation downtown, I must say. Blair was just on the phone with the harpoon. Making out he needed The Big Key and could we spare it a few minutes. So that's what they think. If we can't figure 'em out, we can always blast 'em down."

Rodriguez maintained his poise, saying nothing. He knew the veteran's habit of blowing off steam. The lieutenant calmed down a bit and said, "Well, what happened?"

Now it became a pleasure to recount the use of The Big Key on one little pane of plate glass.

"Come on, Joe," Bennett suddenly said. "I'm just as hungry as you must be. Let's finish this at the spaghetti joint up the street."

The decision of the veteran detective later, after the soothing effect of hot food and a fragrant cigar, was to maintain the fiction of suicide again.

"The pattern points to a very clever guy," said Bennett. "I was inclined to think of the Graham-West murders as an outside job—by some crazy-jealous boy friend, perhaps, of Irene West. But with what you've dug up on background, it begins to look like an inside job. Both of them do. Our killer could be in either camp or hired by either camp—the young, up-coming people of the agency or the old-timers there who resent being screened out of power and big money."

Rodriguez, like Bennett, had never worked in a business office a day in his life, and he found it difficult still to believe that someone with sufficient cold nerve and ruthless attitude would be working in such high-level advertising circles. Joe Rodriguez leaned more to the idea that an outsider, perhaps mentally deranged, was getting revenge on these business people for fancied persecution of unknown nature. That was why he had followed up the Bryta Star lead.

As an alternative to looking afield, he had thought a while about resorting to some of the old reliable standby test-traps, such as having somebody leave a bundle of money loose on a desk and see if anyone was fundamentally crooked enough to steal it or such as running polygraphs on the likeliest suspects.

Nonetheless, Rodriguez respected experience, and he replied, "The up-coming young group offers four candidates. In the older group, I guess we have to enter them all."

"Right. Even the woman, Frieda Ponson. I think everyone of those older ones would like to slide into the top spot before it's too late in their careers and draw down fifty grand a year."

"In that case, we can expect further trouble and right away," said Rodriguez. "An outfit big as Hailsmann's can't operate without a quarterback like Patch. Mr. Hailsmann will probably have his new man on the job by morning."

Lieutenant Bennett remained silent for a time, obviously thinking hard about the significance of the remark. Then his face brightened.

"Can we trust Hailsmann?" he asked.

"On account of his wife's position as a power behind the scenes, I would say no. Anything Hailsmann is told will surely be wormed out of him by his wife."

"Could be. Well, then we'll bug that Executive Officer's office without Hailsmann's help. You agree we have to do it, don't you? The guy who knew how to lock that office from the inside and then make his getaway may tip his hand somehow. A run-down on talk in that office can't help but be valuable in the long run."

Rodriguez had been thinking along with the unfolding of the proposition, and he said, "How about doing it when the window is fixed?"

"Good. Kelly will look like a window fixer in that water meter inspector's coat of his. I'll have him over there first thing in the morning to make a preliminary estimate."

"I think we might take a chance on Varley Olds, lieutenant. He's the art director and he's out of the political picture, so Hailsmann indicates. His office is right next to the corridor into which Patch's back door opens."

"One desk ear, one carpet wire," Fred Bennett called off, writing the note to himself. Now Joe, what's with this stripper that's got you steamed up?"

"I'd like to take in her show tonight," Rodriguez said with a smile.

"Okay, but keep your mind on the horse race, young fellow."

NEARING 11:00 p.m. Rodriguez drove into the crowded parking

lot of the burlesque bar on Lankershim Boulevard. A warm-up ski of a baton juggler was going on as he entered the smoke-filled concourse. A five-piece combo ripped off 'Tahitian Moon', with an old-time trombone artist pumping out the jazz rhythm. The crowd of men and women filled chairs and lined the walls standing.

Juanita Alvarado Byerley first came to view with a blast of entrance music and a louder blast of cheers, and very dramatically, Joe thought. The curtain parted and there was a stage set consisting of a giant gold-filigreed frame.

The picture in it was a simulated old master, crudely stroked on canvas, yes, but dazzling with the real live Bryta Star in the fulsome costume of an 18th Century English socialite in a mansion garden. What a gimmick, thought Joe, a touch of class for a jaded audience.

Bryta held the pose rigidly, unmoving, for half a minute until the applause died down. Then she burst from her living picture bonds, stepped out on the runway, and the grinds and bumps began. It was evident that there existed a huge interest in how aristocratic ladies of King George III's day dressed for a garden stroll.

Nonetheless, the eyes of the young detective were not on the shining black locks of the prancing senorita alone. He searched the faces of the audience, seeing several character actors in current TV serials. Then his eyes narrowed instinctively. Lester Tappen, Peter Clay, and the young Detail Room man from the agency, Jay Crisnant, were standing in absorbed attention against a wall.

Rodriguez retired behind a cluster of bar customers and began his vigil.

The agency people could be simply patrons of the art, catching a new act; or the older executives

could be checking up on a girl whom they knew to be the first wife of Ron Byerley.

At the conclusion of Bryta Star's performance, the Hailsmann people left, along with a portion of the crowd. Rodriguez tailed them to the parking lot, got his own car positioned, and followed the Phinxa sedan out of the lot.

It did not go far; merely around several neighborhood blocks until reaching Riverside Drive, and then into the fringes of the Toluca Lake district adjacent to Universal City, and in front of a large terrace apartment.

The detective parked casually, saw the direction of walking taken by the threesome, and went to the rear lawn of the wing in which the men had disappeared. As he waited behind a thick hedge of oleanders, a light went on in a king-sized window of an apartment unit on the second terrace.

A few minutes passed and Rodriguez edged in to a full view of the window. There he saw Tappen and Clay seated in chairs and the young fellow, Crisnant, in the kitchen, opening the refrigerator. Crisnant was evidently chauffeur, bartender, general handyman for his superiors. Soon all three were talking amiably in the living room and sipping drinks.

The place could be Crisnant's, perhaps, Rodriguez considered, but definitely not Tappen's or Clay's, for the semi-luxury of the gardened multiple was below their expected standards of home living. Rodriguez decided to wait out developments. At least he had bumped into an intriguing situation.

In the end, almost an hour later, the explanation came. The place was Bryta Star's. She came in the door in a professional flurry and dropped in stagey exhaustion on a davenport, accepting Crisnant's drink on the spot.

Presently, she left the room and soon returned in a hostess tent shift. In another half hour, the detective saw the three men pantomiming their goodbyes and leave. Rodriguez left his leafy bower, too.

VI

AT DE LONGPRE, Lieutenant Bennett's reaction to the information was, "So we move Tappen and Clay up ahead of Mohlman, Gregorian, Byerley, Walsh, Silsley, and the rest. The question is, just what do they have in mind with that broad? A force play on Byerley?"

"Whatever it is, we can be sure it's going to cost them a few C's. I know Juanita's type. She's no dizzy little Mexican tamale."

At this point in the dead middle of the night, Jose Juan Rodriguez gratefully learned one advantage of being in charge of a case. He could make his own hours and

could balance off the recent experience of adding a day trick to the night watch. He went home to the environs of Chavez Ravine, set the alarm clock for 8:30 a.m., and turned in.

By the time he reached Hailsmann Associates, Inc. in midmorning, there was no sign of Officer Kelly impersonating a window estimator, so Rodriguez knew that somewhere out of sight a mechanical ear was ready to listen in the plush office of the Executive Officer.

Rodriguez went direct to Peter Clay, intending to study the man more closely. Mr. Hailsmann had ruled his Office Manager out of any chance for promotion up into the big money. Clay must know that fact. He might secretly be the type who would not hesitate to do something drastic about it.

"Most everybody feels the same as I do," Clay explained yesterday's tragedy to the detective. "Orville was riding to a fall. He was driving himself unreasonably. He never did recover from his wife's passing."

"He used a Forty-Five. I guess he had a service record."

Clay nodded. "World War Two. He was a ground officer in the Air Force and served overseas."

"That explains the gun. The ordinary person is afraid of that cannon."

Clay seemed glad to change the subject. "Oh, yes," he said, "Mr. Hailsmann has called a meeting of the organization for noon. He's going to announce Orville's successor."

"I wouldn't mind being in the audience," Rodriguez said. "This kind of a business fascinates me."

"Stick around and I'll take you in."

Nothing had come up in the talk to indicate a man with a secretive side, Rodriguez considered. He decided to reserve judgment on Clay. Maybe Clay was simply a strip-tease fan who had enough money to get sociable with the artists.

At the Chairman of the Board's gathering, the packed roomful of copywriters, artists, production experts, secretarial people, and miscellaneous executives showed no reaction one way or the other when Arthur Hailsmann finished a brief tribute to Orville Patch and matter-of-factly said that Ron Byerley was being elevated from Account Executive to the post of President and Executive Officer.

The detective had anticipated some kind of demonstration of approval, despite the tragic circumstances of the announcement. Rodriguez wondered if a wholesale lie detector test of the impassive people present would turn up anyone thinking dark thoughts.

Nor was Byerley outwardly overwhelmed. He took charge at once with a two sentence speech of acceptance. "I admired and re-

spected Orville Patch, as I know all of you did, and I intend to direct the affairs of the company with the same energy and devotion he displayed. I'll be in the Exec's office on through into the evening if anyone cares to see me on matters affecting the interests of our clients or their own interests."

Byerley looked the part, Rodriguez decided, of the aggressive young manager who could cope with any complaints of older executives who now were under his supervision. And the more Joe thought of the significance of this young man more or less inviting quick settlement of potential differences, the more he felt that tonight would be a logical time to stay close to the ad agency premises and try to learn something. After the meeting, he went to the new Exec's office.

"I'd like to congratulate Mr. Byerley and talk over a few things," Rodriguez told Linda Bee, the pretty redhead secretary stationed outside the door.

"I'm sorry," she replied frigidly, without making an attempt to phone in. "Mr. Byerley is holding all calls and appointments. He must not be disturbed."

Joe Rodriguez did not know at first whether to laugh or to get mad. He never could figure out young women 'executives.' He compromised by showing his LAPD identification to the girl.

"Call in, miss," he said evenly, "and tell him I'm here."

Linda Bee dropped her full-charge airs and took up the phone immediately.

At the door, Rodriguez heard the inside catch button click as it moved over to the open side. Executive Officers seemed to have a yen to bar their doors. Inside, the detective proceeded to his business at once, omitting the congratulations bit.

The idea behind his 'talking over a few things' was to try to rattle Byerley, to stir up any doubts and suspicions he might have with regard to his associates. This was a technique he had learned from Fred Bennett, who believed that some cases died on the vine because suspects were not prodded and scared into taking hasty and unwise defensive measures.

"Everything happens at Hailsmann's," Rodriguez started off. "What I'm going to ask has nothing at all to do with the suicides. It does affect you personally, however, and now that you are running the works here, we thought you might want to hear of this."

Young Byerley stared back at Rodriguez and was quietness itself. Rodriguez met his eyes and saw personal confidence.

"About your first wife, Mr. Byerley, has she been in contact—"

"My first wife. Good Lord, man, I haven't thought about her for ages. How did you know I was married before? What's the connection?"

"She's back from Mexico," Rodriguez said. "Turned up in North Hollywood as a stripper. There's a matter of a Mexican police record that we're checking out."

"A stripper," Byerley said in a licked voice. He appeared honestly bewildered now and not the confident young manager taking over a company's destiny.

"She's using the show biz name of Bryta Star, in case you're interested. In a little flesh parlor on Lankershim. But we're not concerned with her artistic accomplishments. We keep tabs on people who come into this area with police records forwarded by competent authorities. People of that kind may turn out to be potential crime causes. As far as you know, then, she's minding her own business and not trying to put the arm on anybody?"

"I know nothing about her. Oh, brother, that's all I need. To have her pop up. Is she using my name around town?"

"So far, no. As a word to the wise, any citizen can stop charge account openings by getting in touch with the credit associations. Well, thanks for your time. While I'm here, I'd like to make a few notes for the archives. Looks like you have no qualms about this room where it happened."

"None whatever. The memory of Orville is a good one, an inspiration."

If he is telling the truth, Rodriguez thought, then he could be a marked man, the next target for an unknown psychopath to remove on his path to power and money.

In making his notes for the archives, the young detective took care to re-study the door situation. Knobs and panels could be touched now because the area had been brushed as well as photoed. At the front door, Rodriguez noted that an electric on-off switch was inside the office, on the left going out, which was normal placement.

However, at the rear door this arrangement was reversed. He decided that the different placement must have been determined by available paneling when the metal walls were fitted together.

He thanked Byerley and left the office, going around to the corridor into which the Exec's back door opened. He wanted to check and see if by any chance the connecting wire of Kelly's bug was noticeable under the carpeting.

The wire was not noticeable in the corridor, but something else was.

The second he saw an electric on-off switch at the left side of the closed door, Rodriguez knew that he had hit upon a possible answer to the locked-door mystery. This

placement on the outside of the office appeared to match the placement of the box on the inside of the office, which would put them both close to the lock mechanism of the door.

If the on-off switch was loosely fitted, or had been especially doctored up behind its protective box plate, then a person conceivably could slip out the whole box, wires and all, and reach in through the hole to set the horizontal catch button, then replace the on-off switch box—leaving a dead man in a room with inside-locked doors and inside-locked windows.

Rodriguez was elated. He was particularly pleased that he had not used The Big Key on a door, for that might have destroyed any chance to verify this new speculation. But this was not the time to crow about his discovery.

He decided to come back in the evening and take over Varley Olds's office. There he could listen to the talk from Byerley's office and when Byerley left for the night, he would be able to examine the switch box unhurriedly. If he himself could walk out the back door, then pull out the box and set the inside catch, his theory would be proved.

The problem of winning Varley Olds's cooperation now remained. If the man was not in on the deception, he could well return that evening, perhaps acting on Byerley's invitation to thresh out a current matter, and thus be the means of alerting the agency to the cloak-and-dagger methods that were being employed by the police. Rodriguez decided to bring his boss into this phase. He knew from experience that the veteran was a master persuader by one or another means.

The Art Director was quietly making a decision on a wall full of mounted ad layouts when the

young detective entered his office.

Rodriguez said, "You'll be doing us a favor if you come back to the station with me now and talk to Lieutenant Bennett."

Olds was all attention, obviously surprised. But Rodriguez judged that the man was not apprehensive. This could be the first occasion in his life when he had been requested to talk confidentially with police authorities. First or not, the prospect proved intriguing to the Art Director and in a short time he was walking up the stairs at Hollywood Division headquar-

ters and being guided by Rodriguez to his commander's office.

After a bit of disarming chit-chat with the artist, Bennett said, "I'd like your assurance that nothing we tell you will go any farther."

"Gladly," said Olds. "I don't know exactly what's happening at the old salt mines, but I know it's not good. Irene West. Austin Graham. Orville Patch. Particularly Austin. He wasn't the type. It may sound odd, but I can see him dropping in on his secretary at night. Some emergency. Getting some red-hot idea or plan into words before he lost the inspiration. He was the kind of blase guy who would do a thing like that and tell his wife about it afterwards.

"The advertising world is sort of different. We have our wierdo types. It does that to men who make money by their wits alone. But then a double suicide. It doesn't figure. I have a feeling you want to talk to me about that don't you, lieutenant?"

"As a matter of fact, we don't, except to inform you that your suspicions have been well-founded. It was not a suicide pact. It was murder.

The revelation stopped Varley Olds cold. After some seconds, he said, "Wait until the papers get hold of that."

"Fortunately for everybody, the press is much too busy on the Pasadena family massacre and the Valley restaurant shooting to pay much attention to what looks like a run-of-mill love nest suicide pact."

Bennett continued, relating how evidence of Orville Patch's murder was even now being checked out, and of the steps being taken to keep tabs on the Hailsmann executive staff.

Varley Olds whistled in disbelief at the fact that his own office was now the business end of wires which would be connected to earphones later. But the man plunged into the thing feet first, suggesting that to help maintain office privacy for the police while listening-in, he could create the fiction of being closeted with a client who was examining advertising art work.

"Would I look much like a client if I took off this uniform and appeared in civvies?" said Bennett. "I want to see that agency set-up myself. There has to be an answer to a locked-door mystery. It has to be there somewhere."

Joe Rodriguez secretly resolved that his boss would not find the answer all by himself; that he, Rodriguez, would do any finding there was to be done and do it first.

VII

AT 7:35 that night, Varley Olds met Bennett and Rodriguez in the Ardmore Ten garage and told them that Ron Byerley was in his new office, talking to Jim Gregorain, the only executive who had gone in yet. Lester Tappen was

waiting for Linda Bee's call to go to the Byerley office. So was Martin Quizzenberry. Practically all of the agency rank-and-file had departed for the day.

The three men went up to the tenth floor and Olds toured them in to his office by a detour, and unseen. Rodriguez immediately attached the relay box with its pair of earphones and handed one set to Lieutenant Bennett.

"You'll keep down that budget and like it," Byerley's voice came over to the detectives. "To my way of thinking, Patch was too lenient on your budgets, Jim. Good try. But you're not alone. They'll all kick and they'll all be told the same."

The instrument then picked up the sound of a scrape of furniture and was silent for some minutes until Byerley said, "Have Tappen wait, Linda. Send in Quizzenberry first."

Soon another voice came on, saying, "Here's your press statement, Ron. Would you care to—"

"I'm not interested in that now," said Byerley sharply. "Sit down, Martin. Check that door first and lock it. Okay. Now. I've got a special job for you. Handle it alone."

"What's up now?"

"A form of public relations, you might call it. Martin, my first wife has turned up in Los Angeles, as a strip-tease artist, no less. She's using the name of Bryta Star, I just found out. She's playing in a little joint in North Hollywood. I want you to go out and catch her act and use your talents to buddy up to her manager—they usually have one, you know—and meet her. As a fan, of course. No mention of the agency.

"I want a report on what kind of a woman you think she is. A bird-brain. A possible criminal. Smart. Dumb. Whatever you can make a judgment on. I know you're not wondering why this has to be done. If the woman seems dangerous, say a possible blackmailer, I want to know it now. We'll figure some way to get her out of town. The right offer will get her off to Vegas or Florida. Catch me?"

"That I do. The wrong woman showing up at the wrong time."

"Thanks, Martin."

The wires went silent again for almost fifteen minutes. Young Byerley was evidently giving Lester Tappen the official brush-off. At length a strange noise filtered into the Olds office.

The Art Director cautiously opened his door to look down corridors. As he held the door and peered, a woman's laugh and a man's voice sounded from somewhere on the extensive floor. The chatter of unintelligible remarks grew louder. Olds closed the door swiftly.

"The boss himself is headed this way," he whispered, "with a woman. It doesn't sound like Minna Hailsmann."

Soon the wires indicated which way the pair were heading: the Byerley office.

"Ron, this lady claims she is Juanita Alvarado," Arthur Hailsmann's voice came over the circuit. "She came to our home this evening and demanded ten thousand dollars. She claims you owe her the money in alimony and settlement. Is this true?"

"It's not only true, but you're going to pay up, kiddo," said Bryta Star. Lieutenant Bennett smiled at the effervescence in her voice. "You thought you were a smart cat leaving me without a dime in Ensenada. You had your divorce, you thought, so what did it matter if you gave me the ditch.

"Well, you haven't got a legal divorce, my friend. Not yet. It took me a little while—six months in the calaboose, in fact—to figure out how to get back at you. Now it's your turn to settle with me, or else."

"Is she Juanita Alvarado, or some fake?" said Hailsmann. "If she's the first wife, I'll pay her the ten thousand. Minna wants it that way. Debby means more than money to us."

"I assure you I did nothing wrong," said Byerley. "The marriage just didn't work. The facts speak for themselves. She started out to be a commercial artist. Look what she turned into."

"I know. A stripper."

The woman broke in indignantly, saying, "I'm proud of myself, you cheap hypocrites. I'm proud of coming up in the world after being kicked in the gutter by you. If you want the truth, I'm on my way to getting in the movies and I won't be the first stripper who made it that way."

"All right, miss," said Hailsmann. "Take it easy. No offense. Come along to my office. I'm sure we can settle things."

To his son-in-law, Hailsmann said, 'You've been at it too long. Call it a day. Come down with a clear head tomorrow and we'll talk things over."

"Okay, sir," said Byerley humbly.

"Good night, Ronny-Bonny," said Juanita Alvarado. "Come out and see me some time. You won't be embarrassed by Bryta Star. Cute name, huh?"

In a short span of minutes, Ron Byerley took his father-in-law's advice and closed up shop. Olds listened at the door and heard the new Executive Officer walk away on the corridors with Linda Bee clack-clacking at his side.

When dead quiet prevailed, Rodriguez and Bennett went around to the Byerley office. The lieutenant traced the paneling, moving his hands up and down and sideways for several minutes. Then he examined the newly-installed piece of plate glass. He lifted the throw rugs over the carpetting. He cast his eyes up to the sweep of ceiling

and along the walls, pushing sections of panels to try to detect any loose construction.

As long as Bennett was not curious about the switch boxes, Rodriguez let him alone. But the young detective relented at last.

"I think I've hit it," he said with a straight face. "When you punched that paneling you reminded me I hadn't checked here." He banged the rear door switch box and it receded a bit and quivered.

"I got you," said Bennett. "Go outside. See if you can pull a Houdini."

As Bennett waited, the box slid out before the veteran's eyes, the hand of Jose Rodriguez came in, bent around and pulled the catch shut. Then the box moved back into place, snug and deceiving.

"A one in a thousand error of calculation," said Bennett. "I mean on the part of the construction people, of course. Congratulations, Joe. We'll keep it quiet and make Downtown come right out and ask how it was done."

Surprisingly to Rodriguez, Varley Olds tagged along back to De Longpre. He was artist-turned-detective now and obviously enjoying every minute of it. Bennett did not object, for he wanted the man available to listen to their talk and put in his nickel's worth if he thought anything was being figured wrong from an ad agency standpoint.

"From what we learned tonight, the spotlight has shifted over to Bryta Star," Fred Bennett said.

"Ten thousand dollars worth," said Rodriguez. "She knows what went on in Ensenada. Somebody might like to see that episode in the public prints. Some others might like to shut her up permanently."

"Keep in mind," said Varley Olds," that Minna Hailsmann also agreed to pay that shakedown. Could it be she knows a way to get it back?"

In the end, it was agreed that Rodriguez and Olds would pose as convivial pals who had been told by Bryta Star to drop in on her apartment and wait for her return after the last performance. This tactic would be in line with the previous informal arrival of Tappen, Clay, and Crisnant at the apartment.

Bennett had no doubt that the apartment manager would take one look at Rodriguez and peg him for a new boy friend. In that way, Joe could case the place and decide how to place the woman under surveillance without her knowing it.

Enroute, Varley Olds spoke up. He had improved on the gimmick in his own artistic way. He suggested stopping at a florist's shop in an all-night super market and buying a large bunch of yellow roses. They were his idea of what a Mexican-American beauty would prefer.

Twenty minutes later, the young

detective put the flowers in a vase belonging to Mrs. Juanita A. Byerley, for so the door plate marked her to the world. By now he had come to regard Varley Olds as something of a sharpie.

Nonetheless, the spirits of Rodriguez sagged as he inspected the apartment set-up. It was one of those units, occasionally seen around L.A., which violates the building code—a one-door deal. No rear door. Everything from people to garbage cans went out or in the one door. In addition, it was a natural fire trap, for a blocked-off person would have to climb out of the big living room window and drop fifteen feet into the garden patch below.

Rodriguez inspected the door locks and hinges. Suddenly he received an even more nauseating blow. Trouble in such a situation could only be solved by application of The Big Key. If locked up with its sliding bolt gadget, no outside key would be of the slightest use in opening the door from the outside.

In Mrs. Byerley's studio bedroom, however, he and Varley Olds found materials that put a brighter look on things. Leaning against a wall were two six-foot tall poster boards of Bryta Star in action. Another poster was partially completed on an easel. Paint brushes, a palette of mixing, tubes of oil colors, and several small photographs were on a work stand. Varley Olds was delighted with the professional character of the work.

"Whoever did these is a born copyist," he said. "Look at this little snapshot. The artist projected up all of this life, color, and action from that tiny photo. A sure eye."

Joe Rodriguez saw another type of art work on a placard, flat on the floor. He picked it up and said. "How about this inspirational little motto?"

The placard read, BRYTA STAR —THE HEAVENLY BODY in large letters; and in smaller letters, *In real life Mrs. Ron Byerley.*

"She must have taken the sign along when she went to the Hailsmanns," said Olds. "That's a real convincer. No wonder Papa H. was ready to open the office safe."

When their observations were complete, Rodriguez opened the moving section of the garden window, noting as he did that the simple turn catch could be hooked in a slot to be out of the way while not in use. This latter item of design was reassuring to him. The place was not a complete Big Key as long as that window stayed open.

VIII

THE BRYTA STAR show was in full bloom when Joe Rodriguez and Varley Olds entered the little palace of lively arts on Lankershim. Olds stood at the bar, absorbed and hardly touching his drink, as Bryta's exposition of the

18th Century socialite's wardrobe progressed.

Joe Rodriguez moved around casually in the crowd, searching out Martin Quizzenberry, whom he expected.

In time, he spotted the public relationist. He also spotted Quizzenberry's associate, whom he did not expect—Ron Byerley. Apparently the new Exec of Hailsmann Associates had decided for a night of personal research instead of rest.

The young detective immediately maneuvered Varley Olds out of view and they waited and watched, watching not Bryta Star but Byerley and Quizzenberry.

In a little while it became clear that a third party was with the agency men. This third man appeared strictly show biz in his oversize TV shirt collar smack up under his chin and the Continental severity of suit cut. Rodriguez noted his smiling features. He was obviously that rarity, a showman executive who could mask his troubles.

At the last round of applause, Quizzenberry, Byerley, and the unknown man headed for the stage wings and disappeared behind drapes. Rodriguez motioned to Olds to follow him and closed up to a position immediately in front of the drapes. The clatter of chairs being moved out for dancing and the commotion of patrons leaving were almost too great for Rodriguez to make out a word of the

conversation behind the drapes.

At least there was no wild scene of recrimination going on, for brittle laughter highlighted Bryta Star's part of the conversation. Then the dective caught the words, from Bryta—"Toluca Lake."

Again Rodriguez took his friend in tow and went to the parking lot to be ready for action. There, he found a phone booth, reported his whereabouts to the lieutenant, and asked him to send Kelly, "with The Big Key, just in case."

As it worked out, only a few cars were left in the lot when the three men and Bryta Star, in street clothes, came out. She and the show biz man, undoubtedly her manager, drove away in a Ferano Birdcage convertible. Byerley and Quizzenberry followed them in a topless Phinxa sports roadster.

Officer Kelly, sitting in the dark in a prowl car, was waiting down the street from the apartment entrance, when Rodriguez and Olds drove up.

"You've got a search warrant if we need it?" Rodriguez asked.

"Right."

"I don't know what's cooking at this point," the young detective explained to Kelly. "The ad fellow may be trying to buy off Bryta Star, influencing her to get lost quick. Or he may have the girl's business manager on his side and they are working out details on some scheme to get her into the movies—maybe through an ad agency commercial film.

"The movie deal would be more to Byerley's advantage. The girl would have to start out new, drop the striptease stuff and work at the innocent image if she got a shot at the movies."

"As usual," said Kelly, "we can only play it by ear."

Nonetheless, 'by eye' would have been a more accurate statement. For, once they had gained the cover of the oleanders, there was nothing to do but look up into the stage-like rectangle of light behind the big picture window.

Even as they looked, Bryta Star went to the opened window, unhooked the catch, and shut it tight.

"That's the reason we asked for The Big Key again," Rodriguez whispered to Kelly.

The tableau before their eyes gave no evidence of good nature on the part of Byerley or Bryta Star. The showman was the only one relaxed. Martin Quizzenberry appeared as an extra in the production, frequently moving between kitchen and living room with drinks for all, and content to sit nervously to one side as the pantomined talk went on.

Rodriguez speculated that an agreement was being seriously worked up, perhaps for cash cooperation on a business-like basis between Byerley and the girl and her manager. Byerley must not have been satisfied that $10,000 from Arthur Hailsmann would buy off his former wife forever.

And he had reason to want her out of his way forever. Whoever eventually controlled Hailsmann Associates, which was actually a fabulous money factory created by years of brilliant commercial service, controlled a fifteen million dollar enterprise, and that was enough money to warp a viewpoint or two and to perform major surgery on a person's conscience.

A round of drinks later, the showman unexpectedly arose, shook hands with Byerley and Quizzenberry, who went to the kitchen for drinks, and said goodbye to Bryta Star at the door. In the manager's lapel now was one of Varley Olds's yellow roses. Rodriguez considered that the girl had thought all along that the roses came from her business associate.

This point of time in the oleander watch, however, was to be the last period of inaction that any of the Star gazers were to know for a while.

Bryta returned from the door, stretched out on the davenport, and apparently called for some service from valet Quizzenberry. In a few moments he came out of the kitchen with a tray containing vari-colored cocktail glasses. The drinks looked to Rodriguez as if they might be Marguerites, sparkling with shaved ice.

Quizzenberry served Bryta and Ron Byerley, then took the third glass and stood before them, at ease for the first time and smiling. Perhaps he was pleased to have helped the Executive Officer solve his problem and change the woman from enemy to friend. He drank his concoction down in one swallow.

Whether from unconscious imitation or real thirst, the girl and Byerley did the same.

Quizzenberry still stood in front of them, glass in hand. His gaze moved from one to the other. Rodriguez saw Bryta Star flop out her hands and legs and go supine on the davenport. He saw Byerley grab at his stomach. A look of shocked surprise was on his face. Ron Byerley fell like a sack to the floor.

"Get Bennett to rush an ambulance," Rodriguez yelled to Kelly. "Then get the Key up there fast."

Kelly dashed off in the gloom of the garden.

Rodriguez took a step, stopped, and became fascinated now, watching Quizzenberry's movements. The man put on his hat and went to the door. The detective pulled at Varley Olds's arm for him to come out into the open lawn. He meant to run around as fast as he could and nab Quizzenberry at the apartment entrance.

But the ad man did not go out the door. Instead, he locked it on the inside and wiped the lock area with a handkerchief. Then he took the vase of yellow roses and placed flowers across Bryta Star's chest, giving the suggestion that she had just held them in her arms. Then he wiped his own cocktail glass, took Bryta Star's purse from the coffee table, ran his arm through the purse-handle loop—and hurried to the big window.

There, he opened the flat pane of glass and hoisted himself up and through, in the sideways manner of a pole vaulter. He held himself in balance on the outside with the finger tips of one hand, while the other hand adjusted the catch lock so that it would fall with the closing pane and lock itself inside.

Quizzenberry dropped in a sudden flip of release. The window pane closed.

In that brief moment of falling, Rodriguez detached handcuffs from his belt, snapped the bracelets on Martin Quizzenberry's

wrists, and tore off the woman's purse from his arm, throwing the purse to Varley Olds.

"You're under arrest on suspicion of murder," Rodriguez said. "Come along."

One hand at the scruff of the man's neck and the other hand at the seat of his pants, Rodriguez forced his captive along on the double, out of the dark garden and to the prowl car. In a jarring motion, the young detective slammed him into the back seat.

"Shoot him in the legs if he tries to get away," Rodriguez said to Olds, and handed him his service pistol.

The Big Key was not in the car. Rodriguez judged that Kelly had been equal to the task and was probably nearing the apartment with it now. Joe ran.

Carrying the heavy battering ram was one thing, but operating it was another. Rodriguez came upon the winded, swaying Kelly in front of Bryta Star's door. The two of them took hold. Joe Rodriguez called the one-two-three and aimed at the lock mechanism. A siren shriek outside put an exclamation point to the towering smash and rumble of The Big Key opening the door.

There it was again, Rodriguez saw. The dilated eyes, the weird set of open mouths as if in unbearable frozen pain. He took pulses and found feeble life. Voices sounded from out in the corridor. Stretcher bearers were ordering awakened tenants out of the way.

Inside, the medics took one look and went to work. With Bryta Star as the top layer and Ron Byerley as the lower layer of a human sandwich, the stretcher bearers jogged out. There was no time for two trips.

"We'll try the pumps in the ambulance," yelled a medic on the way out. "It doesn't look good."

Rodriguez closed what was left of the door and took Juanita's purse from Varley Olds. A big rubber-banded roll of hundred-dollar bills added up to ten thousand dollars. Juanita Alvarado had done all right for herself.

The lock on the window now occupied the young detective's attention. Sure enough, the steel catch was similar to that on the office plate glass window: weighted heavier on one end in order to drop in place easier when shut. He noted the similarity, then wanted to laugh out loud at himself.

He had been too hasty in deciding that the killer of Orville Patch had exited by the rear office door. Here was plain evidence that the killer could have gone out the window, and then let the window catch fall into place and lock itself.

IX

"NICE WORK, Joe. And you, too, Plainclothesman Olds," said Fred Bennett when the flushed and smil-

ing pair arrived back at De Longpre.

"Any chance for the girl and Byerley?" asked Joe.

The lieutenant shook his head. "They left us fifteen minutes ago. And there's a sleeper showed up for you. Walked in on his own power and wants to make a statement." The lieutenant flipped the intercom and said, "Bring in Crisnant. Also Quizzenberry. Might as well wrap it up in one package."

Jay Crisnant looked unafraid, not as if he were hiding something. Handcuffed Martin Quizzenberry had now recovered from the shock of his quick transfer from impending riches and freedom to abject personal misery. Stubbornness was written all over him.

Rodriguez wished that his newspaper reporter friends could be there to see this man under the gun of the law. Joe felt that his case had turned into a classic one. But LAPD was not in the publicity business. In the scramble of big crime stories breaking simultaneously no newsman apparently had the time to ask probing questions about Joe Rodriguez's Big Key Suicides.

"I suppose you're going to plead innocent," said Fred Bennett. He was needling Quizzenberry to talk.

"Whatever happened was not my doing," Quizzenberry replied stiffly.

"Then who's the person?" said Rodriguez. "You forget that Mr. Olds and I witnessed your poison drink routine. We were out in the garden, remember?"

"Ron Byerley's your man," said Quizzenberry. "Go make him talk."

"Byerley is dead," said Bennett. "So is Bryta Star. Making false, trumped-up charges will do you no good. You're a prisoner and under arrest. The second charge is suspicion of murder of Orville Patch."

"There's the man who shot Patch," said Quizzenberry, throwing out his cuffed wrists towards Crisnant.

"Like hell I am," Jay Crisnant said.

"What did you come here for?" Bennett now said roughly to Crisnant.

"Those paintings you must have seen at Miss Star's. They're mine. I do a little moonlighting around town, trying to make both ends meet. I'm not a bad artist, even if Hailsmann's keeps me in the Detail Room. Well, I did some work for her when she first came to town and she liked the stuff very much. I got to know her through her manager Ted Reaves. He's an old friend. And Bryta's an artist herself.

"I learned she was the first wife of Byerley and what a smelly deal she got from him—deserted in Mexico without a dime. Anyway,

when I heard the news flash I figured I better come in so you wouldn't connect me up with it. That's my statemet, sir."

"You didn't mention the fact that you told Lester Tappen and Peter Clay what you knew about Bryta Star," said Rodriguez. "What were you cooking up?"

Quizzenberry said, "I told you so."

"Shut your damned mouth," Crisnant yelled at the public relationist. To Lieutenant Bennett he said, "You can check everything I told you, sir, and it's the truth. Yes, I told Mr. Tappen about Bryta Star. He's kind of an uncle to me around the shop—the only one who ever went out of his way to encourage me. Mr. Tappen was quite surprised. He said Mr. Clay should know about Bryta Star because Mr. Clay is close to the big boss on personnel matters.

"So I took them out to meet Bryta Star. There's no crime in that. As far as Dizzy Quizzy saying I had anything to do with Mr. Patch's death, the man's nuts."

A desk sergeant came in while Crisnant was talking and placed a report slip before the lieutenant. Bennett read it and stopped Crisnant from talking further, saying, "I know he's nuts, young fellow."

Then he stared directly at Martin Quizzenberry and continued, "You made a fatal mistake when you unconsciously re-set the safety catch on that Forty-Five." Bennett patted the slip of paper on his desk. "Our print bureau just reported on the matter. You left a thumb print on the magazine next to the safety catch. It's hard to set that catch without leaving a print. The gun's too heavy.

"Of course, I realize you set the catch so you could hold the pistol safely and flick Patch's fingers on to leave his prints."

Rodriguez came in, facing the now subdued Martin Quizzenberry. "Just for the record," he said, "did you leave Orville Patch's inside-locked office by the back door, using the movable switch box, or did you go out the window onto the fire escape walkway and drop the window back into place so that it locked itself?"

His awareness blunted by the massing evidence, and apparently without thinking, Quizzenberry carelessly said, "The back door."

"Just like at Irene West's apartment, of course."

"The back door."

Rodriguez, the only detective who had cased the West apartment, now knew that Quizzenberry had the answer to that locked-door mystery, the answer which he himself did not yet have, though he had puzzled greatly over it. He waited, for a flick of seconds holding his breath, but Quizzenberry now went dumb.

Rodriguez resolved on a last shot in the dark. "You had me fooled for a while on that one," he

lied. "I worked on the apartment window for five minutes, trying to find a pane of glass that would open, but it was an anti-smog window, permanently closed."

"I know," said Quizzenberry. "I worked on it myself, when Ron Byerley ordered me to stay until morning and hide. I figured if I could get out the window it would still be the mystery effect he had planned, all locked up. But I had to stay there alone with those dead people—people I knew pretty well and liked a little bit, too.

"Byerley had it figured that you would break down the rear door, not the front. It was all simple, the way he planned it, except for being alone with those corpses. But I hadn't poisoned them, so I was able to sweat it out. When you came in through the kitchen, I was plenty glad to duck out of the broom closet and disappear."

Lieutenant Bennett looked at Jose Rodriguez without a trace of emotion. Joe knew very well what his boss was thinking about: the classic escape of a locked door murderer. And Rodriguez knew that he had booted that possibility.

To Quizzenberry Bennett said, "You're hoping a jury will accept your statement that you were an accessory in the first murders, and that only an accessory would have the guts to wait it out in a room full of corpses. Well, go ahead and name Byerley in section one of your signed confession. That's your privilege. From then on, you're on your own, fellow."

"But Ron Byerley made me take care of Patch. Byerley owned me by then."

"That I don't quite understand," said Bennett. "Why did you willingly become the hatchet man? I can understand some weak young patsy agreeing to that, but not a grown man, seven or eight years older than Byerley and holding down a good job on more or less fairly equal terms with him at the time."

"About all I can say is he owned me. He knew my record back in the old home town. He was the young brainstorm of the place. A strange kid, who scared you with his knowledge. A fellow I was fighting died. It was a grudge fight, and Byerley saw it happen. I was ready to turn. Byerley talked me out of it. He lied with me and helped me get off the spot. I might have got life imprisonment or the chair in that tank town.

"Then I met Ron again on the west coast and he was a big shot ad man, married to the boss's daughter. I was on the shorts and Ron got me a job, got me in the ad agency when several people were dead set against me—Tappen, Clay, Gregorian, Graham. He helped me work up to public relations director."

"Meanwhile, ambition had

gone to Byerley's head," Bennett said.

"Worse than that, I might as well tell you. Success and big money had turned him into a full-fledged psychopath. He wasn't going to be content with half-measures of success, either. Irene West had the misfortune to attract his attention with that pretty figure of hers. But she kept him at arm's length. She told Austin Graham what was going on and Graham was crazy mad. He was just about ready to run to Arthur Hailsmann and blab the whole story. Byerley saw he stood to lose everything if Minna Hailsmann heard of it.

"We followed the cab that night of the Bowling League. Byerley wanted to bring Austin Graham to Irene's apartment. We woke her up and everybody started drinking all over again. At this point, I had no idea Ron was going to kill them. I thought he was going to stage a love nest scene for Hailsmann's benefit, to discredit both Irene and Austin. Then I found out that nothing was going to stand in his way."

"Why did you turn against him, then?" asked Rodriguez. The young detective still had at the top of his mind the picture of Martin Quizzenberry serving the lethal drinks, smiling as he did it.

"I didn't actually turn against him," said Quizzenberry. "The girl and her manager Reaves had agreed to keep quiet for one grand a week for five weeks, plus movie introductions. Byerley came to the kitchen and gave me the high sign to bring him the drinks I was mixing. He took a little medicine bottle from his pocket and poured out doses of his hydrocyanic acid into two of the glasses. Those were intended for Bryta Star and her manager. Sort of drinking a toast of death to the settling of their deal. Then Reaves suddenly decided to leave early.

"That ended Ron's toast of death idea. The next time Bryta wanted a drink, I brought in those drinks more or less automatically, confused, not thinking what was in them, making up one for myself. They drank up. I might have got one of theirs by accident, too. Byerley had outsmarted himself, that's all."

"Except," said Rodriguez," that you didn't outsmart your own self when you remembered the lady's purse and the ten thousand dollars in it."

"It's simple to see what happened," said Lieutenant Fred Bennett. "You let yourself get hypnotized by unexpected success, Quizzenberry, just like Byerley went off his rocker. Only you were hypnotized by the fact that you thought you had beaten the police with locked-room murders. You thought you could make it three in a row—five people in all.

"And you were particularly

pleased to get rid of Byerley, the man who owned you. You'd have Byerley out of the way and ten thousand unexpected dollars in your jeans and you could run away and hide if necessary. But you forgot about The Big Key. When anybody forces us to use The Big Key on a straight case of crime detection, we just naturally get suspicious, and that's not health, man, when a detective gets suspicious."

Lieutenant Bennett turned to Rodriguez. "Take him away, Joe. We don't need a signed confession. We have evidence and witnesses for everything. I'd like to see this one come to trial, Joe, and see you get the top billing. I think we're short a Detective Sergeant at Hollywood Division."

In the Next Issue—A Shocking Novelet

THE HICK FUZZ

By ED LACY

He was being well paid for being bored and fly-casting for trout. All he had to worry about was the threat *of violence . . . until a crime inferno broke loose.*

Gilbert Hacker was an extremely flexible man . . . on the crime trapeze.

WHEN GILBERT HACKER got desperate enough, he made a kind of safari among his distant relatives, hunting food, housing, and—with rare success—cash. The latter was always obtained as a loan, but there is no record that so much as a dime was ever repaid. Still, Gilbert was charming and boyish, in spite of his chronological age, which was forty-two. Distant aunts and cousins found him good company, since he knew

DEATH FROM THE SKY

by ARTHUR PORGES

how to flatter older women, deriving much of his income from that knack.

In his earlier days, he had been known to some of his schoolmates as "Encyclopedia" Hacker, because of the enormous accumulation of facts he managed to store up in the archives of his excellent memory. Few of these were of any practical use, but they did serve to dazzle the unsophisticated, which helped to set them up for some kind of exploitation.

What kind, exactly, depended on the circumstances; Gilbert was flexible except in regard to one thing—earning an honest living. On that point he was stubborn enough to make De Gaulle seem like a vacillating fellow who never knows his own mind.

Up to now, he had never once called on his old Aunt Della, mainly because she lived in Illinois, which is a long way from California, where Gilbert normally foraged. But having exhausted the food, bedding, cash, and patience of his numerous western relations, and still not having picked a winning horse, or found a wealthy sucker of either sex, Hacker had little choice.

An old cousin, slightly feeble-minded, was tapped, when her guardians got careless, for enough money for a bus-ticket, and Gilbert headed east.

It was not a pleasant prospect; Aunt Della lived alone on a farm, and the largest available town had barely enough people for a game of bridge. There was a hick college somewhere in the area, he knew, however, and elderly college professors, if they happened to be spinsters, were often easy game.

They didn't have much, which was a drawback, but when a man can't kill deer, he'll settle for rabbit. Besides, Aunt Della herself might be good for something above and beyond food and lodging.

Although the old lady hardly remembered Gilbert, she was soon able to place his folks, who had died while he was a baby. And since she had nothing against them, Aunt Della welcomed her nephew if not with warmth, then with a kind of watery resignation.

Gilbert sized her up quickly as

not very bright, but stubbornly fixed in her ways. That meant he must seem to agree with all she did, and to admire her for faults as if they were virtues. It was a game he had played often. Fortunately, she was a good cook, and Gilbert liked to eat.

The first few days weren't bad; Illinois in spring can be lovely. But Hacker was no Thoreau; the green of grass merely suggested a different kind of green, the sort that goes with currency. There was none to be had on the run-down farm. That was obvious.

But by the end of the week he made an interesting discovery. There was an old barn, locked and neglected, on the far side of the blueberry patch. When he peered through a dusty window, all covered with the cobwebs of decades, he could see that the whole sizeable structure was stacked with wooden cases, obviously untouched for years.

It goes without saying that Gilbert's exploitation antennae, sharpened by a prolonged absence of stimuli, prickled violently. A wild hope filled his heart that the cases contained pre-war—pre-World War 1, even!—whiskey; that Uncle Ulysses might have been a bootlegger before his death twenty-odd years earlier.

He was tempted to attack the lock at once, and examined it, finding to his surprise that it was well-oiled, and showed signs of constant use. That made a difference. If Aunt Della kept that close a watch, he'd better move warily.

That night, at dinner, he questioned her, half expecting to be snubbed. But Aunt Della seemed quite willing to discuss the barn and its contents.

"They belong to my grandfather," she said in her thin, whistling voice. "He was a famous doctor, and made this elixir right on the farm here. 'Dr. Hiram's Soothing Elixir for Fretful Babes —It Will Quiet a Hurricane.' That's what it says on the bottles," she added complacently.

Gilbert felt his heart sink. No whiskey—just patent medicine. So much for his crazy hopes.

"There must be a million bottles of the stuff," he said. "What are you keeping it for? It's worthless nowadays."

"I used to play there as a little girl," she said, her withered cheeks flushing. "I felt safe and warm there." She gave him a timid glance. "I still go there when I'm troubled. It's a refuge, you see."

Gilbert managed a sympathetic smile. "Why not?" he murmured. "Most of us can use a refuge these days."

"The key's hanging over the kitchen sink, if you'd like to try it," she said, pleased at his reply.

"I might just do that," he told her. Adding silently to himself: That'll be the day, Gilly! This

place is driving me nuts as it is. All I need is to start brooding in a barn.

"How many years have those cases been there?" he asked idly.

"Grandfather died in eighteen ninety-six," she said. "But he wasn't very active then. They began to pass all kinds of silly laws, and he wasn't allowed to help people any more. So he put all the elixir that was left into the barn, and told me —I still remember every word, and the way he said it. He was a big man, with a deep, rich voice. He said, 'Della, when all the kids for miles around are wailing their poor little heads off, you can come out to the barn and tell yourself what damn fools we have running the gov'ment!' "

"I wonder why they stopped him—" Gilbert began, only to break off suddenly, his eyes alight.

"I don't remember," Aunt Della said. "But it was them college doctors that did it. They said Grandfather wasn't a real medical man. Him that was helping people before they were born!"

Hacker hardly heard her. From the stored facts of his memory he already had the answer. Her grandfather had obviously been active in the period from, say, 1860 to 1880. Soothing Elixir, by God! In those days that meant opium; every one of those bottles —and there were thousands— held from eight to fifteen percent of pure opium.

Gilbert knew people—Sam Griffin, for one, of the Syndicate— who would pay high for those cases. Any kitchen chemist could extract the opium easily; and from opium you made—also a simple job—morphine and/or H, both like gold in the bank.

"It could be, Aunt Della," he said slowly, "that I could get you some money for those cases. They're not worth much," he added, "but some people collect old bottles, you know. We could empty out the elixir, and—"

"No," she said sharply, her mouth pursing to a bluish knot. "Not as long as I'm alive. Didn't I tell you that was my refuge. Just the way it is. I won't have it touched. I thought you understood," she said reproachfully.

"I do, I do," he hastened to assure you. "I just thought you must need money—"

"I got enough to last me my few years on earth. After I'm dead, you can do what you like. I don't have any closer kin I know of," she added; "and you're the only one ever to visit me. So I'll just tell Lawyer Meredith that whatever ain't mortgaged you can have. The farm's not likely to bring more'n a few dollars over the mortgage, but nobody can touch what's in that barn.

"When I'm gone, you can sell the bottles. At ten cents apiece, you could get—let me see; nine thousand cases of two dozen bot-

tles each—well, it would be a pretty good nest-egg, young man."

"Nine thousand cases!" Gilbert exclaimed. "That many!"

"Pretty near, as I remember. Will people pay ten cents for an old empty bottle?"

"I'm sure they will," he said. And it wasn't a lie, at that. Even without the stuff inside, bottles from 1870 might be saleable. He wouldn't miss that angle, either. But Aunt Della wasn't dead; she was thin and spry, tough as an old hen, and might last another ten years. But not if Gilbert could help it. He gave her a cryptic stare, but she was as unaware of her doom as a turkey in August.

For the rest of that week, Gilbert mentally sorted out and rejected hundreds of schemes, all potentially fatal to Aunt Della, but, alas, equally fatal to her killer.

Meanwhile, he saw to it that Lawyer Meredith was informed in writing that the barn's contents belonged to Gilbert Hacker in case of the old woman's death. And that meant, of course, that he had to be particularly careful about how she died. There must be no suspicion of foul play. He was as nervous as an alligator in a handbag factory, but wise enough not to be hasty.

Because of his tenseness, he sought what diversions there were, even to the extent of visiting Barrington College, thirty miles away. It was a typical agricultural school of the sort that might have found higher I. Q.'s among the experimental stock than among many of the students. At least, it seemed to Gilbert that several of the steers showed more alertness and comprehension than the kids on the campus.

Wandering moodily about, disappointed even in the lack of attractive co-eds—they apparently didn't care to major in pig-raising—he ended up in the musty museum near the attic of the old brick building. There, in a case off to one side, he saw a jumble of rocky fragments labeled METEORITES.

A card informed him that they had fallen during the big meteor shower of 1887. The card also advised him that they had been collected by the late Professor of Geology, Warren Rufus Bright, and had passed from his private museum to the college after his death in 1937.

Gilbert was about to turn away, when he suddenly froze in a half twist. Clearly the dusty assemblage was not a main attraction any more, if it ever had been. If one of those fragments—a heavy chunk that looked to be at least nine ounces of jagged stone—disappeared, it would never be missed. To make sure, Gilbert could knock off a few angles; then nobody would even remember seeing it before—not that anybody had that

kind of a memory for such stuff.

The dark, stuffy little room was deserted; the eleven o'clock classes were still in session. Gilbert went to the door, made sure nobody was coming down the corridor, and went back to the case. Quickly he lifted the lid, which wasn't even fastened, took the meteorite he fancied, re-arranged the others just enough to cover up its absence without changing the total picture too much, and slipped the rough chunk of stone under his jacket.

Ten minutes later he had it safely stowed in his car, and was heading back to the farm.

There was just one more point to check. Some seasons were most suitable to meteoric showers. Just possibly he was in luck, and that season was at hand, or would be soon. Then goodbye to Aunt Della, and hello to a barnful of H. Man, those nine thousand cases should net him at least ten grand, maybe more! And the bottles could be worth a buck apiece, for all he knew. Collectors hunted for glass from the 1860's.

To his delight the evening paper actually mentioned that tonight would be one of the best for watching meteorites. There was something about Leonids and orbits of minor planets, but Gilbert was not interested in adding to his store of facts just now. Instead he questioned Aunt Della about the local sheriff.

She sniffed scornfully.

"Old Jack Evans? Slow as molasses in January, that man. But then, how can he learn much; no crime in these parts."

That will change tonight, Gilbert promised silently.

After dinner he invited Aunt Della to came out and watch the sky with him.

"Supposed to be a lot of fireworks up there," he said.

She wasn't much interested, but he coaxed her, brought a wrap, although it was a mild spring night. When they were out in the scented air, he gave her a brief lecture on astronomy, pointing out a few of the brighter stars, and showing her the white glow of Jupiter.

Then, as the first of the meteorites streaked across the sky, he

had a final stroke of good luck, for one actually came to earth not more than a mile away. It would be at most a fraction of an ounce, when it hit. But the mere fact of its being noted by others would support his story.

And so, Aunt Della looked up in a kind of uneasy wonder, for she still thought more of God than of astronomy on seeing the night sky, Gilbert struck one determined, vigorous blow with the museum meteorite. He had broken it down a bit to change its shape, but there was more than enough to crush Aunt Della's frail skull. She fell forward without a sound.

Gilbert's heart pounded. He'd never done murder before, and didn't like the feeling. But he soon recovered. Years of illegal chicanery had hardened him even more than he knew. With a firm step he went to the house to call the sheriff and tell him about the terrible accident—the one-in-a-billion tragedy—that had befallen his aunt.

The sheriff was not so slow in coming, Gilbert noted. He came in a battered station wagon; he was a small, white-haired man, and his blue eyes were surprisingly—and to Hacker, unpleasantly—penetrating.

He turned his big flashlight on the body. Gilbert pointed out the bloody meteorite, and stammered something about so crazy an accident.

"It must've been that big one that fell near here," he said. "Maybe it exploded, the way they do, and this one piece—" he sighed, shrugging.

"It came down on the Jackson place, I hear," Evans said. "But if so, there wasn't anything left; at least, when I phoned right after, old man Jackson said they were looking, but hadn't found anything."

"The air burns 'em up," Gilbert said. "They move so fast."

"This one wasn't going too fast," the sheriff said. "Else it would've gone right through her head, I'd think."

"When they get near the ground," Gilbert explained, having checked that point himself, "they can be going pretty slow. It all depends."

"Well, I'll just take this along," Evans said.

To Gilbert's surprise, he picked it up quite carefully by one projection, and maneuvered it into a cardboard box he brought along apparently for that purpose. Hacker was not so sure the old boy was slow mentally, but it didn't matter. Nobody could prove a thing, even if suspicions were voiced. He was completely covered. This was a guaranteed meteorite. It was bloody and it had no prints—he'd seen to that. And some kind of fireball had dropped in the area, which was an extra bit of luck.

Of course, it wasn't so good that

he'd broken off some. The thing had evidently been polished by flaming through the air, and the chipped places were rougher; but that could have happened after it hit Aunt Della.

When the sheriff had examined the body in a casual way, he phoned for the coroner, who took it away. Shortly after that, Evans left, too. Gilbert went back to the house. In not more than a week, the verdict would be in—death by accident.

pistol almost between Hacker's sagging lips.

"Why?" he barked. "In God's name, why? A harmless old lady! And everybody knows she wasn't rich, or anything. Why'd you kill her?"

Clearly the officer took a rather subjective view of murdering old ladies, particularly poor ones, and was obviously hoping Gilbert would resist arrest so he could send a .357 magnum slug through his chalky face.

Mike Shayne Leads Next Issue's Headliners with—

THE MOGHUL BOX

It was the kind of case that could make Shayne super-cautious about pausing to light a cigarette on a darkly-shadowed street.

By BRETT HALLIDAY

After that, the will would be probated, and he could talk to Griffin about those precious bottles. Meanwhile there was food in the house, and the elderberry wine wasn't too bad, either.

He had every reason to be optimistic, and felt that way until Sheriff Evans came by the following afternoon, and stuck a huge

Hacker knew that Evans was using poor technique in holding the gun so close to a captive—all the textbooks urged lawmen to stand well back, so the criminal couldn't snatch at or deflect the weapon. But he did not resist, theory and practice being a little different with so much at stake.

But he did ask for an explana-

tion, trying to sound insulted and injured instead of scared green; and when the sheriff could control his anger, he gave him one, in a chill and extremely unpleasant voice.

"It was a good scheme; anybody might get hit by a meteor, even if the odds are against it. What with that one landing so close at Jackson's place, you sure had me convinced. I'd have stayed that way, too, damn it, except that Ted White, science teacher at the high school, when he heard I had a meteor, was wild to see it, and came down to the office."

Here Evans took it from his pocket, waving the jagged thing under Hacker's nose.

"White was a pupil of old Rufus, way back, and told me how all the specimens used to pass around from one geology class to another for years. Since White was the professor's assistant all the time he studied there, this meteorite, even with parts chipped—you do that?—looked a little familiar to him the minute he saw it on my desk. But he couldn't be sure until he remembered something else—this!"

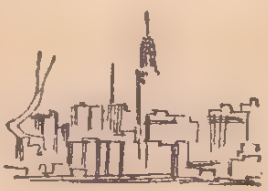
He pulled off a large, convex fragment held in place by the friction of a tight fit.

"White and his pals sawed this chunk off in the lab one day, and then cemented it back on. But first—" He pointed to an inscription, neatly carved on the meteorite at the bottom of the cavity. Hacker stared at it, reading, but hardly comprehending: MARS LOVES VENUS.

"They figured it was a good one on the professor; but either he didn't ever spot it at all, or outfoxed 'em by not letting on, if he did. So the joke was more on them, you might say."

Evans took out a pair of handcuffs.

"Meteorites come from space, but this kind, with wise-cracks, they come from college kids!"



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To Draw a Line

Sheriff McKinney had a juvenile crime problem to iron out . . . the hard way.

by D. S. HALACY, JR.

SHERIFF MATT McKinney listened with growing impatience to the owner of the dusty '65 coupe he had just returned. Sam Leland was different now, the self-

conscious smile a marked contrast to his red-faced anger when he'd reported his car stolen.

"That's the picture, Sheriff," Leland said jovially. "Let's forget the whole thing, eh? You know how these kids are!"

"You mean the Renner boy had your permission to take the car?" McKinney jerked his head toward the driveway. He had half-expected this reaction. "You reported a stolen car, Sam. We had a statewide bulletin out."

"Sure, sure!" The hand on McKinney's arm was placating. "I appreciate your picking up the car, Matt, believe me. It's just that Harry Renner called me, Sheriff. It was a prank. You know. Hell, I've got a kid of my own. They all make slips!"

"I've got a kid, too," McKinney said wearily. He dropped one foot from the porch, knowing he was wasting his time.

"That's what I mean. We're all in this thing together. You know?" Leland was smiling confidently now, his point made. "Live and let live is my motto. Like that misunderstanding we had at the Club, remember?" He winked wisely, then dropped his hand to his pocket and brought out his wallet.

"Like I said, Matt, I sure as hell appreciate your help, and that's not just talk, either." He thumbed up a ten and held it out to McKinney. "Here, get the wife something, Sheriff."

McKinney shook his head and backed the rest of the way down the steps. "No thanks," he said. "I get paid every month, Sam."

"Yeah. And I'll bet that raise we voted you helps, hey, Matt?" Leland replaced the bill, shrugging. "Least I can do is run you back uptown then."

"Never mind," McKinney told him. "If you aren't going to press charges there's no need for you to come in."

As he left the house Sam Leland's profane complaints stirred hot anger in McKinney. So now he was just supposed to forget it, the way he had the slot machines down at the Club and the surreptitious deliveries of 'groceries' to Leland Renner and others.

There was no good in getting his blood pressure up. The time for that was way back when he'd been introduced to the two sets of rules that ran the county seat of Clayton. His was a political job and he had to keep his nose clean for that check he'd reminded Sam Leland about.

Murderers and thugs were no problem, especially when they stayed across the tracks where they belonged. But the other violations—traffic and liquor and 'pranks'—they were different. You had to give a little here and there.

Leland had fallen back on his own son for an excuse. Didn't everybody have kids! McKinney's boy was fifteen now, with Matt's

black wavy hair to go with Ellen's eyes and smile. Ross already had shoulders nearly broad enough for McKinney's blouse. Lord, how the time went by. So much he had promised Ellen when he came back from Korea and was elected Sheriff. When you got right down to it, Ross was still about all they really had.

Turning in at City Hall, he scowled and shook his head. Ed Renner needed a lesson. Last year it had been the beer brawl up in the hills at the Renner summer place. Two months ago Nick Mazza had caught young Ed with Theresa and whipped the girl and then Ed when he protested. So the grocer from across the tracks had been hauled into court—to be let off with a slap on the wrist because he was a convenience to Harry Renner!

Judge Bristow was talking to Kelly, the desk sergeant, when McKinney went into the office. Nodding to them, the Sheriff got out of his blouse. It was hot, even this late in the day, and thinking of Ellen's allergies didn't help.

"Judge," he said, opening a drawer, "you need the business, so I'm bringing you a case."

"Don't tell me Leland really stuck his neck out!" Kelly said. He looked astonished.

"I'm charging young Renner myself," McKinney said. "Maybe a scare will wake him—or his old man, up. Harry Renner is a fool."

"Take it easy, Matt," the Judge broke in warningly.

"—if he can't see what's happening to his boy," McKinney finished. He heard the door slam then, and looked up belatedly to see Harry Renner standing in front of his desk.

"Hello, Harry," Judge Bristow said, picking up his briefcase and moving toward the door. "Matt, you'd better think it over."

"What can I do for you, Harry?" McKinney managed, one hand moving to cover the paper he had started filling out.

Kelly coughed and busied himself sharpening pencils as carefully as if he were a draftsman.

"You might clarify that remark about me being a fool, for one thing," Renner said, smiling disarmingly.

He was a big man, big as the

Sheriff, though not as solid. Running three businesses and playing as much golf as he did, he hardly had much time for his son.

"You should have taken him in hand before this, Harry," McKinney said. "I'm preferring charges for auto theft."

"Hell, McKinney!" Renner said jovially as he sat down comfortably on the edge of the desk. "I guess Sam Leland didn't get through to you. No need of this going to court." He took out a cigar and snapped the band from it.

"Leland doesn't have to make a complaint," McKinney said. "I'm doing it."

"Hard-hearted Matt," Renner said, keeping it good-natured. "We sure get our money's worth from you."

"I don't have to back up for my paycheck, if that's what you mean," McKinney said. There was still a slug in his side from one chore and his arm was stiff and ached whenever the weather turned damp and chilly.

"That's right, Matt. You earn it all. Even that fifty-buck raise the county put through for you." Renner said it easily, then his tone changed and he looked chastened. "You're right about me being a fool, too. I'll get Ed on the ball, so you just tear that piece of paper up like a good guy."

"You've said that before," McKinney reminded him. 'I'll tell you —Nick Mazza did more for Ed than you did when he was fooling around that girl over there."

"Don't tell me you spent all *your* youth working on Eagle Scout badges, Matt," Renner said, his eyes glinting to put an edge on the smile. "Hell, I'm trying to get along. Mazza whipped Ed and I let him off with a warning. I try to be fair and I could see Mazza's side of it. I'm still doing business with the guy."

"So?" McKinney said, tight in the chest because he knew Renner was rough when he had to be.

"You've played ball with us, Matt," Renner said. "Look, we've all got problems. It's not easy bringing up the boy alone, you know."

The hurt in Renner's eyes wasn't faked; McKinney could imagine what it would be like to lose Ellen. But how much could you justify just because a man had troubles?

"I'm getting Ed a jalopy," Renner went on, smiling broadly again. "Should have done it long ago. He'll toe the mark. What do you say?"

It was smooth, the kind of selling job that made Renner the biggest man in town, but this time McKinney told himself he wasn't going to let it be enough.

"Sorry," he said. "This isn't like turning over outhouses or painting a statue in the park, Harry. I've got no choice."

Renner drew in his breath

around the cigar, then exhaled a trail of smoke. His face changed and what had been only a hint in his eyes became pure anger. Once before McKinney had felt the heat of such a look, when he suggested that Renner put a stop to the gambling at the Club. Across the room Kelly began to hammer furiously on his typewriter.

"You're mistaken, McKinney," Renner said finally. "You *do* have a choice. You can tear up that damned paper or you can run against Jock Cubberly this fall."

"Cubberly?" McKinney repeated, trying not to let it show how the threat stunned him.

Cubberly was a nice guy, a good backslapper. A big campaign could beat McKinney, and at thirty-seven you didn't just grin and go into some other line of work. He had a choice all right. Renner had laid it on the line for him.

"Understand now," Renner said, "I'm just trying to get along. You stick to catching crooks and not hounding kids."

"I'm not hounding kids," McKinney said defensively. "This is a matter of making a young lawbreaker face up to what he's done."

"I'll make you look like seven kinds of a damned fool if it goes to court, McKinney," Renner said. "Let up, man! Join the human race again and we'll forget all about it."

Before McKinney could stop him, Renner reached down and slid the paper from the desk. With one hand he balled it and dropped it into the wastebasket.

As quick as it had faded, the man's smile was back, and McKinney had the odd feeling it had been there all the time. Renner slapped him heartily on the shoulder, pressed a couple of cigars into his hand and strode out of the office. "See you around, Matt," he called back over his shoulder. "You're all right!"

Kelly finished with his typing abruptly, but he kept his gaze on the desk while McKinney got his blouse and cap. Finally he spoke.

"I didn't hear anything, Matt," he said lamely.

"Shut up," McKinney snapped. "Any calls for me, I'll be home."

ELLEN WAS IN the backyard, putting off the heat of the kitchen as long as she could. She was still beautiful, McKinney thought, in spite of the years and the problems and the gray hairs. He kissed her, hoping he had hidden his troubles this time. But she read them as she always did with some sense he could never fathom.

"The Renner boy?" she asked, and McKinney had to hold back a curse.

"It's all over town then?" he asked dully. "McKinney, the brutal, child-baiting cop?"

"You know people, Matt," Ellen said. She made room and he sat by

her on the swing, his fingers gripping her hand tightly as he told her about it.

"I caught Ed joyriding forty miles out of town; beer cans in the back seat. But Leland decided not to do anything about it," he said wearily. "Harry Renner really put it to me. If I bring charges, he'll campaign for Cubberly this fall."

"Matt! We couldn't afford it, even with your raise, could we?"

"The raise buys a refrigeration unit for the house," he told her harshly. "It wouldn't make a down-payment on the kind of hoop-de-do Renner will put on for Cubberly. It's like he told me; I can take my choice. Hell, I'm no better than Nick Mazza, Ellen!"

"Don't talk that way, Matt. He's a drunken little man who beats his children."

"He's a bootlegger who has to crawl for his customers," McKinney said. "And at least he didn't excuse his daughter when she got in trouble. Ed Renner is going off the deep end one of these days."

"You can't do it all," Ellen told him gently, patting his arm. "I'd better start supper. The house is cooler now."

"At least we'll have the refrigeration in soon," McKinney told her wearily as they moved into the steamy house. "Maybe it's just the heat that's bugging me anyway."

"I'm dreaming about it," Ellen said. "You're sweet, Matt, and I'm proud of you."

"Where's Ross?" he asked, getting a beer from the refrigerator. "We were going to play catch tonight."

"He's—out with the Nelson boys," Ellen said, her voice cautious. "They were going to the airstrip. He'll be back soon. Don't worry about him, Matt."

"You're right. Ross is okay. You know, Renner thinks I've got some kind of a complex and maybe he's right. Hell, we've all got kids."

Ross was home in time for supper, running over with talk of Jerry Nelson's roadster that they had clocked at ninety-seven on the drag strip. Ed Renner was just a

kid too. Maybe he *would* shape up, McKinney told himself.

After dinner he sat down with pencil and paper and figured the payments on the refrigeration unit for the house. His raise would cover it in two years. Smiling, he took a cigar from his pocket and lit it. It was one Renner had given him—a good, expensive cigar.

In the weeks that followed, the pressure eased. Ellen was tickled with the refrigeration and McKinney was proud of it and pleased with himself. His wife's eyes lost the red, weepy look and her breathing was better. There was even a bonus in the deal. Harry Renner picked up a unit wholesale to save McKinney two hundred dollars.

City Hall seemed to sigh its relief after the storm. Judge Bristow made no comment about the auto theft charge against young Renner that fizzled out, and Kelly had sense enough to keep his mouth shut too. There was no further mention of Jock Cubberly or any other opposition for the Fall election, and the thought of an unopposed ticket in September was an almost guilty relief.

Young Renner got his car, a low-slung English job. The kid took corners fast in town and speeded on the highway, but McKinney shrugged it off. He had to give that inch when he couldn't turn his back fast enough. To do a job for them all, he had to have support, and to get that support, he could overlook some little things.

Ten years ago the Sheriff had seen only RIGHT and WRONG in capital letters and vivid black and white. Now he faced facts and the need for safety valves. It was a dry county, but there had to be a way to blow off steam. So there was Nick Mazza. And there was Matt McKinney.

Why hit the panic button when kids drank a beer now and then? Joke them out of it and you were good guy. When Ross came in late McKinney pretended not to notice. The boy couldn't be a hermit. Ellen was pleased when he did things with the 'nice people's' kids.

There was a Country Club dinner they were invited to; Ellen in a new dress and as pretty as any woman there. Harry Renner had them stand up for a little applause, pointing to McKinney's record in the years since he'd taken over. The town *was* better. McKinney didn't have to kid himself in regard to that. Sam Leland and his wife sat across from them, Clara friendlier than ever to Ellen. And afterwards Renner staked McKinney to a fistful of silver dollars for the game tables.

"Drink up, Matt," he said. "Hell, I knew we could all get along! No real problem there."

The town had made a pact, and McKinney's name was still on the bottom of the document with the rest of them. *Live and let live. No-*

body's perfect and if you slip, that's just one you owe the rest of us.

Harry Renner had problems, and so did Sam Leland. Judge Bristow had an alcoholic sister, and Matt McKinney an allergic wife and a boy who would soon have to be put through college. He had house payments too, and now the extra bills for the refrigeration. But with the pact, everybody got along. It worked beautifully, right up to the time Ed Renner led a string of hot rods through the roadblock on the state highway.

Young Renner broadsided his beautiful new red sports car into the police cruiser parked sideways across the road. He was only skinned up but Frank Nelson, riding the bucket seat alongside him, had his right arm mangled, his skull fractured, and half a dozen ribs broken. The Nelson boy had no guardian angel looking out for him, but Matt McKinney did.

After the Sheriff gave thanks that it wasn't Ross in the car with young Renner, he added those for having been away at the state capitol when it happened. The first he knew of it was when Kelly's panicky phone call pulled him out of the meeting.

"You'd better get home quick, Matt, the sergeant told him. "We got two kids in the hospital and half a dozen in jail. And Renner is down here raising holy hell!"

It was all in Harry Renner's flushed face. Rage and disbelief, shock and shame at having failed. Not that Renner would ever admit that the failure was his. McKinney knew his own escape had been a miracle. The state troopers had made the arrests. He was safe.

If he were careful, he could ride this out and not lose anything. Ross hadn't been injured; he wasn't alone in the jail and there'd be no disgrace because the 'nice people' weren't going to be disgraced.

Because the boys were juveniles, the Judge released them in custody of their parents. The editor of the local paper did his best, trying to make it seem like an accident. But the capitol dailies carried damning headlines: DRUNKEN TEENAGERS TANGLE WITH POLICE and HOT-RODDER INJURED CRASHING ROADBLOCK. Young Ed was named as the ringleader, and Renner was livid.

Ellen was sick with worry. Ross slumped miserably on the edge of the sofa after they got him home, and haltingly told them the whole messy story. It had started at the drag strip. There was plenty of beer and then a bottle passed around.

"Where'd the beer come from?" McKinney demanded, sharing his son's shame.

"Mazza's—where else?" Ross said sarcastically.

"The liquor too?"

"No—I don't know." Ross held his head and stared at the floor. "I guess Bob Leland swiped it from

his old man's bar. He was bragging it was hundred proof."

"Thank God," Ellen whispered. "Thank God, *you* didn't have it."

"No, he just helped drink it," McKinney said, his jaw tight and his stomach a twisting knot of pain.

"That's right," Ross mumbled. "Why didn't you just leave me down there? I had it coming, all right."

Ellen flung herself on the boy, protesting tearfully, and McKinney left them to go onto the back porch and sink into a chair. He was sitting there in the dark when Ellen finally came out to find him.

"Suppose he'd been hurt, Matt —killed," she whispered, clinging to him.

"You think I haven't been doing just that every second since three o'clock this afternoon?" he flung out. I'm the one who put Ed Renner back of the wheel, you know."

"Don't, Matt," Ellen said, and she was crying. "You know you couldn't have done anything then. What I meant was that we're so terribly lucky."

"That's right," McKinney said. "And let's be thankful for another lucky break while we're at it. What do you think Harry Renner would do if I'd been the one who put his kid in jail?"

"Matt, Matt!" Ellen sobbed. "What can you do?"

"I don't know," he said dazedly. "So help me, I just don't know *what* I can do, Ellen."

He should have known that Renner would do it for him. If he had been thinking more clearly, he would have foreseen the solution, the easy out. The pact had been ruptured by circumstances the town couldn't control. By a miracle McKinney was safe and clear. There had to be another goat and Renner wasn't long in finding one.

"Bring him in, McKinney!" Renner thundered. "The kids will testify he sold them the beer, and we'll put the blame squarely where it belongs!"

"You're going to hang Nick Mazza for this?" McKinney asked dully.

"Whose side are you on, McKinney?" Sam Leland cried. "Ross was in it too, you know. We're all in this together!"

"That's right," Renner said. "So you see to it that Mazza is here for the boy's trial. Do you understand that?"

"Arraignment, you mean," McKinney said. "All right, Renner, you can all go home now. You've done your duty."

Babbling assurances to one another, the knot of parents drifted out of the office. Renner lingered behind, flanked by his lawyers. He poked at McKinney with a dead cigar, his face a cold mask.

"Don't get so damned cocky," he warned. "It's not long until September. Remember that. And

think about your own kid. This is a serious thing."

"That's right," McKinney said, nodding. "I'm *not* cocky, Renner. Not the least bit. I'm scared to death, if you want the truth."

THEY TOOK CARE of Mazza, pointing the finger of guilt straight at him and howling for blood. Watching the numbed white face, McKinney felt a sordid kinship as the man whined and took it. The grocer would be sacrificed, take the sentence for providing alcoholic beverages to minors.

A suspension would be worked out, probably Renner and the others would pay the fine. Mazza would take it and go on making money on the liquor he supplied, even though he had lost his beer license! Ed Renner and the others got a light slap on the wrist and were welcomed back to the family bosom.

Ellen cried her relief as she held her arm protectively about Ross. It was terrible about the Nelson boy, of course, but he was alive and getting the best of care and sympathy from everyone. Big-hearted Harry Renner paid the bills.

And McKinney had escaped by the skin of his teeth. All he had to do now was go through the motions a bit longer and the town would settle back to normal. September would be a pleasant, no-contest formality. There would be occasional raises if he kept his nose clean, and there might be more fringe benefits from time to time. It was all a part of the pact, the code they lived by.

He listened to Judge Bristow administer the punishment, a warning lecture to be more careful in the future. McKinney could feel the tension easing as he watched the faces about him relax. The tightness should be going out of him too, but it didn't. And when the Judge finished, McKinney got up slowly and moved toward the bench.

"I've got something to add, Your Honor," he said, interrupting their celebration of victory.

There was a stir of confusion in the court, and feet shuffled uncertainly. Bristow eyed him, shook his head slightly. But McKinney held his ground and the gavel rapped for quiet.

"This won't take long," McKinney said, his voice firming now that he was committed. "Please sit down, Mr. Renner." He waited while the man shot an angry glance at his three attorneys and then sat down.

"Nick Mazza is guilty as charged. He sold our kids some beer and they went off on a wild party that ended with them crashing a police barricade. Today we're all here, embarrassed by what's happened. All of us but the Nelsons, that is. They're worse than embarrassed."

He could hear breaths being

taken in and someone snorted indignantly. But he kept on talking.

"It wasn't the first time our kids bought beer from Mazza's store. Some of us even sent them to buy it for us once in a while. First with a note, and then later without a note. Not much different from cigarettes. Nick was a convenience that way. Always open, and never too strict about laws."

"I don't have to put up with this!" Renner exploded. He was on his feet, both arms waving.

"I'm almost finished," McKinney said, feeling the irony of the unconsciously chosen words. "We made a deal in this town of ours. You, Mr. Renner. Me. All of us. Crime was across the tracks where it belonged. But there were some little vices we had to permit ourselves. Like slot machines in our clubs, and booze available from our friend Nick Mazza. And patching up little troubles our kids get into."

There were half a dozen angry shouts, but the gavel hammered the room into an uneasy silence again. Kelly stood in front of the double doors at the back of the room and mopped self-consciously at his face.

"We decided we could shape the law to suit our needs. And if we didn't pay attention to something bad it might go away. I'm not condemning a soul in this room, unless it's myself." McKinney tapped his chest, conscious of the white faces of his wife and son staring up at him.

"But all of a sudden I wonder how I'd feel if it was my boy and not Nelson's who'd been hurt. Or killed."

A woman cried out and men were on their feet shouting angrily, but McKinney made himself heard over the noise.

"What I'm trying to say is this: Count me out from here on. Renner, you can start warming up your candidate for September." He took a deep breath and finished his

speech, accenting the words with a stabbing forefinger.

"Until you vote me out of office, though, you can count on this. Anytime I find you breaking a law —any law, you'll answer for it. Speeding, gambling, illegal drinking. And that goes for your kids too. If they get in trouble I'll do my damndest to put them in Juvenile Hall. You can get them out of there without too much trouble. The cemetery is something else.

"That's it. I just want you to know where we stand and what's happened to the bargain we've made over the years. God help us. All of us."

And then McKinney stepped down and went toward where his wife waited for him, still white-faced but with tears of pride in her eyes. They stood there, hearing the embarrassed shuffling of feet and the low rumble of shocked talk as the court emptied. A hand touched the Sheriff on the shoulder and he turned.

"McKinney." It was the Judge, his hand dropping to take McKinney's in a firm grasp. Then the gray-haired man patted Ellen on the shoulder and smiled at her.

"You shouldn't be crying," Judge Bristol told her. "You've got a fine man for a husband. And Ross, you've got a father you can be proud of, boy."

"I know that," Ellen said, her fingers gripping McKinney's arm. "We'll be all right."

"I believe we *all* will," Bristow said gently. "We've got to pay a debt. But we're entitled to a second chance, and I think we'll get it. You've got my vote, Matt, and I have a hunch there'll be plenty of others."

"I'm glad," Ellen said when they left him in the office. "So glad, Matt!"

McKinney was glad himself. The way he felt was something he had almost forgotten and it was good to be back. No matter what the price.

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